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Integrating writing across the curriculum enables special needs students to become writers

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Integrating writing across the curriculum enables special needs students to become writers

Abstract

Elementary students with language and learning disabilities became independent writers and readers after the classroom instruction changed from a teacher directed, segmented, skill deficit approach which is typically found in special education classrooms to a classroom which embraced whole language philosophies and provided students with the necessary conditions for learning written language. This paper describes the specific changes in teaching philosophy, instructional practices, methods, and strategies which were implemented in my classroom. It demonstrates how individual student challenges were met which enabled the students to increase their self-esteem and awareness of themselves as writers.

**Integrating Writing Across the Curriculum Enables Special Needs Students
to Become Writers**

**A Graduate Research Paper
Submitted to the
Division of Reading Education
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts In Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA**

by

Gretchen Peterson-Kobriger

December 1998

This Research Paper by: Gretchen Peterson-Kobriger

Titled: Integrating Writing Across the Curriculum Enables Special Needs Students
to Become Writers.

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

12-7-98
Date Approved

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Samuel C. Stringfield, Editor
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk
Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk
Johns Hopkins University
3505 North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21218

December 1, 1998

Dear Mr. Stringfield,

I am writing this letter to request that the enclosed research paper be reviewed for possible publication in the **Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk**. This paper was written as part of the requirement for a Master of Arts Degree in Education and based on research I conducted in the area of writing with students who have learning and language disabilities. The students included in the paper were in my elementary self-contained special class during the 1997-1998 school year. The paper describes the changes in my teaching philosophy, classroom environment and curriculum which embraced whole language philosophies including writing across content areas, and the conditions for learning which enabled my at-risk students to become writers. Also included in the paper are descriptions of specific instructional strategies employed with students and examples of their written products which demonstrate growth.

The title of the paper I am submitting is: Integrating Writing Across the Curriculum Enables Special Needs Students to Become Writers. The paper includes forty-one pages and three appendices. All student names used are pseudonyms and permission to include examples of their progress and written products was obtained from their parents.

I hope that your journal has a place for a research article of this nature. I look forward to hearing from you regarding my article. Please contact me for any questions, concerns, or comments.

Sincerely,

Gretchen Peterson-Kobriger

Running Head: Integrating Writing Across the Curriculum

Integrating Writing Across the Curriculum Enables Special Needs Students

to Become Writers

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Abstract

Elementary students with language and learning disabilities became independent writers and readers after the classroom instruction changed from a teacher directed, segmented, skill deficit approach which is typically found in special education classrooms to a classroom which embraced whole language philosophies and provided students with the necessary conditions for learning written language. Opportunities for writing were provided across content areas, at different times of the day and using a variety of materials. Students were also exposed to learning and applying literacy skills under multiple intelligence theories. Students with language and learning problems benefit from learning strategies which employ the use of multi-modality practice. This paper describes the specific changes in teaching philosophy, instructional practices, methods, and strategies which were implemented in my classroom. The self-contained special education classroom in which I teach and refer to in the paper is located in the Midwest. This paper demonstrates how individual student challenges were met which enabled the students to increase their self-esteem and awareness of themselves as writers.

Integrating Writing Across the Curriculum Enables Special Needs Students to Become Writers

Two years ago, Michael was unable to write anything independently except his first name. To express his thoughts, he conversed. Michael was quite gifted verbally and able to carry on interesting conversations with people of all ages. Michael and I were both frustrated that he was unable to demonstrate his gift in the area of written language. I knew something had to change. After a year of reflection and planning and another year of implementation of new teaching practices, I found that Michael was able to express himself through writing and drawing. Last spring, Michael wrote "I went to my sastors hous. We went to the mal. I had fon." Accompanying his writing was a beautifully elaborate picture of his sister and himself at the mall. In this paper I will explain why and how I changed my teaching practices in my writing program in a self-contained classroom for children classified as language and learning disabled. To illustrate this change, I will highlight the growth of two students who were non-writers at the beginning of the school year: Michael and Shelley (all names are pseudonyms).

The student population of the Midwest city school in which I teach is culturally, ethnically, and economically diverse. I teach students with moderate language and learning disabilities in a self-contained classroom with little or no integration. My students range from kindergarten through third grade and are diverse in their learning abilities and needs.

My past teaching practices in the area of language arts were similar to those that take place in many special education classrooms (Burke-Smith, Deegan & Jaggard, 1991; Zucker, 1993). Language skills were segmented and isolated from meaningful contexts using a skill and drill format usually taught two to three days a week. My classroom instruction focused on skills like identification of letters, sounds, and formation, alphabetical order, sentence structure, punctuation, introduction of new vocabulary and the most commonly occurring function words, such as the. Students wrote in journals about assigned topics a few times a week under much teacher direction. The language experience approach in which students dictated and I wrote, was used as the primary writing strategy in the classroom. Authentic or student-directed writing activities were not encouraged or allowed. Due to the high level of teacher control and lack of student choice, freedom, responsibility, and opportunity for writing, most students were completely dependent on me for writing and were not enthusiastic about participating in writing activities.

Our writing sessions were filled with constant cries of “teacher, teacher.” I found myself solving all writing problems for the students, because it seemed to be a more efficient use of our time. Even while I knew I was doing most of the work for my students, I could not understand why they couldn’t write. I understood that most of these children came from homes with few print materials and that they were personally unfamiliar with the process of writing, but I assumed they would just learn to write. As a child I always enjoyed writing and certainly could not understand why my students did not share the same feeling.

Brian Cambourne's (1988) writing on the conditions of learning provided some insight into the connection between my traditional classroom methods and my students' lack of progress. Cambourne states that children will learn to write if they are provided with the same conditions of learning that the real world provides for learning oral language. In many cases children are not provided with these conditions to learn writing in school. This was the situation for my students. I did not provide a print-rich environment with opportunities for engagement in both group and independent authentic writing activities. I did not encourage approximations toward writing nor were the students rewarded with frequent feedback regarding progress. These conditions were not present in my classroom; thus my students became uninterested, unmotivated, unwilling and unable writers. It was only after reading Cambourne that I understood why. Thus, I sought to change the conditions for learning writing in my classroom so that they paralleled the conditions which occur in most home environments for learning oral language.

I set goals for my classroom instruction: to provide students with a broad variety of writing activities across genres; to provide students with opportunities to write in all content areas, to improve the self-esteem of students through a developing awareness of themselves as writers, and, finally, to increase student interest, motivation, participation and independence in writing. It was my hope that students would leave my room as independent writers who enjoyed writing. I wanted my students to know the purpose for their writing as well as the many different audiences and reasons for writing. I wanted my students to be able to

write for those purposes which would include journaling for personal enjoyment, and writing letters to family, friends and partners-in-education. I wanted my students to enjoy writing plays, poems and responding to books, as well as to write informational pieces for science. I wanted my students to write every day with increasing independence. I wanted my students to be able to use invented spelling, as well as conventional spelling. I wanted my students to be able to express more than one idea and to keep the interest and attention of their audience. If all of these conditions were met, I felt my students would be able to use writing to communicate their feelings, their thoughts, and what they had learned.

What I Did

I first changed the way I viewed my role as a teacher of writing. Cambourne (1988) states that the teacher must give students the responsibility to make decisions about what and when to write. I began to allow students to make decisions about what they would write about in their journals, or how they would respond to a story or lesson through writing. Many students wanted to draw, while others wanted to retell using puppets. These were all viewed as acceptable responses. Cambourne also states that a teacher must accept approximations toward the "ideal" completion of a task by students. I learned that I must accept and respond to many developmental forms of communication, such as: drawing, letter-like formation or strings of letters to represent words, invented spelling, or sentences which were incomplete and didn't make much sense to me at first. These are just a few of the forms of expression employed by beginning writers as they work their way through the various stages of writing development (Calkins,

1986; Weaver, 1980). I expected my students to move through these stages and become independent writers. I encouraged them at every opportunity to do the writing or responding by themselves and responded favorably to their efforts to express their ideas.

In the past I had valued the final product and ignored the stages of writing development including the process of writing. In many cases, I would actually do the writing for the students so the product would be acceptable to me. Several researchers have discussed the importance of valuing the process and not just the product (Calkins, 1986; Weaver, 1980; Cambourne, 1988; and Johnston, 1992). When the teacher focuses primarily on “perfect” work or the mechanics of writing, then this is what the students learn to value also. My focus on perfect products actually restricted and limited the amount of writing my students did. Therefore, I began to value the processes students employed to communicate their ideas, and helped them build an awareness of the particulars of their progress. I also provided frequent opportunities for students to share their writing with both me and their peers. The feedback they received helped them see themselves as writers and to clear up confusions in their writing. As student self-confidence increased, I watched their writing development improve as well.

Peer work was a technique I used to invite students to work in pairs to discuss and share what they saw in each others’ pictures as they wrote. Olshansky (1994) suggests using artwork as a stimulus for writing and also advocates that students work in pairs throughout the stages of the writing process. I thought that having the students work in pairs was beneficial for both the students and for

me. The process allowed the students to come up with more ideas for writing and it provided me with more time to walk around and observe students and help those who needed a little bit of support instead of spending a majority of my time with one or two students.

The second change I made was to create a classroom environment “that was rich with print” so that I could immerse my students in the language processes (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996; Cambourne, 1988). Most importantly, I displayed stories and writing in the room and hallway. Student writing was on display at the classroom library and in book boxes for students to read. Charts and webs were created through interactive writing for many topics in science and social studies. These charts and webs were used not only for informational purposes, but also as tools for writing. Various other word charts such as calendar charts, rhyming word charts, number word and alphabet charts were displayed around the room as resources for the students (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Some charts were teacher-made while many others were created with student input. In the classroom library, I added a bookcase so popular books could be displayed to catch the interest of my student readers. At the suggestion of Fountas & Pinnell, I included a writing center with different kinds of paper, writing and art materials and provided students with the freedom to write in small groups (Calkins, 1986). I also added an alphabet center where students could work on alphabet books, letter formation, or play games which focused on consonant sounds. Calkins states that labeling the room provides an excellent opportunity to demonstrate invented spelling. After the children and I labeled all of the “important” items in

the room, students had an excellent reading and writing tool to use all year. It was especially important to them, because I allowed students to choose the items we labeled each day and they participated in the spelling of words by sharing the letters/sounds they heard through interactive writing (Clay, 1993).

I also incorporated the use of a Word Wall to which high-frequency words were added throughout the year to aid the reading and writing of students (Cunningham, 1995). The words came from a list I compiled using several sight word sources and were introduced each week after they appeared in guided reading books or other texts the students were reading. After reflecting upon the needs and abilities of my students, I decided to introduce each word, and then chant it using a variety of movements three times as a group. The inclusion of movement and student interaction increased the interest and learning of the new words and helped meet the need of the multiple intelligence strengths of students (Walters & Gardner, 1985).

The third change was in the frequency of writing and the inclusion of writing across content areas and genres. Weaver (1980) states that "in whole language classrooms, children are invited on the first day of school to write something that makes sense." (pg. 2). She adds that all children, including those in kindergarten and special education, should write every day. Students who do not write every day spend more time getting back into the flow of writing when they do write and also become more hesitant toward writing as they get older. Students who write infrequently also have more difficulty generating topics for writing. With this knowledge, I began to include opportunities for my students to write every day.

Weaver advocates the use of journals in the classroom and teacher modeling of journaling processes. I modeled in mini-lessons and shared my journals along with the students (Avery, 1993). On the first day of the school year, I had students “write” in their journals. Many students simply drew pictures and then attempted to label them with strings of random letters. This was a big step for me; for the first time I provided my students with choice and accepted and responded to what they could do. Other new forms of writing in my classroom included number word books for math, writing in science and social studies, responding to literature, writing letters to partners and family members, writing and illustrating parallel books, and using the computer as a writing tool. I also collaborated with the art teacher who was very interested in incorporating writing and the writing process into the art classroom (Olshansky, 1994). During art class, the students often labeled or wrote a story relating to a piece of their artwork. The pieces of writing which emerged through the use of art were extremely creative and descriptive.

The fourth change was to make the curriculum more student-centered than curriculum-driven. This was an important change to make and beneficial due to the fact that my curriculum should reflect the needs of individual students as indicated in their Individual Education Plans or I.E.P.’s. Past instruction involved taking skills from either the I.E.P.’s or my lists of skills the students seemed to be lacking and teaching them sporadically a few times a week. I found that children with learning problems do not usually learn and apply skills when they are taught in such segmented, sporadic and/or decontextualized ways (Zucker, 1993). I

discovered that my students would be more likely to learn the skills when taught through consistent, purposeful writing experiences.

Assumptions of the whole-language philosophy are that language learning is taught from the whole to the part, it should be functional and integrative, that students should be engaged in language and that students should interact with peers (Burke-Smith, Deegan & Jaggar, 1991). I needed to provide opportunities for my students to respond to literature and learn about the aspects of language through reading and writing. I needed to provide my students with real or authentic writing activities of their choice. I needed to provide mini-lessons or individual conferences for students to focus on needed skills through the use of print materials students were currently working with, not from isolated worksheets. I needed to allow students opportunities to choose whether to work with partners or alone. I decided to provide my students with these conditions to help them develop the language skills, interest and motivation to become writers.

As I changed my focus to writing, I implemented the four writing elements of the balanced literacy program which were shared writing, interactive writing, guided writing or writer's workshop, and independent writing. Shared writing is writing that the teacher and student work on together. It may involve the student dictating what he/she would like to write to the teacher. This is much the same as the language experience approach I already used in my classroom. In interactive writing, the teacher and students also work together. It might involve a group story where students step in and write when they are able to. For example, a student might help with the spelling of a word, or write a sentence. Guided

writing or writer's workshop is writing in which students work through the writing process in developing pieces of writing. The teacher or a peer may scaffold or assist a student at any time through the process. Independent writing is writing that is student-initiated and authentic in nature, which means the student chooses the topic, audience, and format for the piece.

I based my instructional decisions on the needs demonstrated by individual students and the class as a whole, rather than on those dictated by curriculum materials. Fountas & Pinnell (1996) state that assessment should be systematic, ongoing and multidimensional. This means that a teacher needs to include both formal and informal measures of assessment in the classroom to produce a well-balanced frame of what a child can do. When we evaluate children we need to look for their strengths or what they can do and build upon those. Systematic and ongoing assessment usually takes place through a variety of informal measures in the classroom. I gathered information about the needs of my students in several ways in order to make my instruction student-based. I began the year by interviewing each student about writing (see Appendix A). Through questioning, I elicited their feelings about writing, what they were able to write, how they saw themselves as writers, as well as what they liked to write about and what materials they preferred. I also met with each student daily, to listen to and discuss their writing. In the beginning, I noted what they said on Post-it notes which I attached to writing pieces and later included in writing portfolios. Bimonthly writing progress interviews (see Appendix B) were also conducted; in these, students had an opportunity to choose pieces of writing from their

portfolio, journals or other sources and share their strengths, weaknesses, and thoughts about their writing. As the year progressed students chose a piece to share with their peers weekly. Peers were given a chance to provide feedback and suggestions to the student sharing. In addition to these informal measures, I also administered the observation survey (Clay, 1993) as a standardized measure of student progress. The writing subtests measured their knowledge of letters, words they could write spontaneously and spelling progress through sentence dictation. Finally, I kept a daily journal of all daily reading and writing activities with specific information about the writing progress of each student. In my journal, I included information about topic selection, writing activities, what strategies students used in their writing, their reaction to their writing, difficulties students were still having and my hypotheses about teaching strategies or activities that might help them. I also recorded my rationale for each change or modification made in the way I taught or scaffolded writing activities. Detailed information about mini-lessons, writing materials and final products were also noted.

Case Studies of Students' Progress

In order to show more specifically how the changes in instruction impacted the children's progress in writing, I will describe the growth of two children from my class. Each of them differed from the others in writing ability, strengths, weaknesses, and interests. I will briefly discuss why I selected each as an example of the students with whom I work. Michael was representative of many students with special needs because he began third grade as a nonreader and nonwriter. He

lacked the confidence to attempt reading and writing, and at times he ultimately refused to participate in these literacy activities. Michael had experienced failure often during his three years in elementary school. Shelley, a first grade student entered my class just as I began to change my instruction. Her progress in reading and writing will demonstrate how a young student with special challenges like a learning and language disability can meet the challenge of learning to read and write when put in an environment which provides the necessary conditions for learning literacy. It is my hope that this paper will show how important it is for the teacher to continuously monitor children's progress and to respond to challenges by seeking additional information or advice, rethinking, reflecting, and adjusting teaching practices to guide these youngsters through the stages of writing development.

Michael's Progress

At the beginning of third grade, Michael had been in my classroom for one and a half years. He is the youngest of four children and is of Romano descent. His mother has shared that all four of her children have had difficulty learning to read and write. Michael's family is hard working and courteous; their commitment to school and literacy learning is different from families of the mainstream culture. Michael is asthmatic and missed as many as forty-five days of school each year. This meant that each day he was present needed to count. I decided to keep Michael in my class another year in hopes that he would develop more literacy skills before moving on to fourth grade. At the beginning of his third-grade year Michael was unable to write his last name, he could identify half of the alphabet

letters and beginning sounds, and was for all practical purposes a nonreader and writer. Michael was extremely frustrated with reading and writing and would not attempt literacy tasks without me sitting right beside him helping him with every word or step. I was frustrated with Michael's lack of school success and wanted desperately to help him grow in skill and confidence.

Michael's initial writing interview (see Appendix A) took place in the fall. At that time, Michael said he liked writing when he was happy, when he tried his best and when he wrote about his family. He also stated there were times when he did not like writing, usually when he was mad, or when there were too many words and letters to write. When I asked Michael to show me what he could write he said "Michael," and "mom". These were the only two words he could write independently. Michael relied solely upon teacher dictation to express his thoughts. He stated in the interview that he needed help with writing ideas, spelling, and writing words. When I asked Michael to tell me about good writers at school, he named only himself and another boy I didn't know. I thought it was encouraging that even after all of the frustration he had experienced, he still thought of himself as a good writer. With lots of prompting, Michael told me he was a good writer because he had good ideas. Michael shared with me that to become a better writer, he needed to work on writing words and spelling, both of which had been our focus the previous year.

Michael was an excellent artist and loved to draw. Up to that point we had never integrated drawing and writing in the classroom. It is likely this was due to the teacher directed instruction which failed to provide the opportunities. On the

first day of third grade Michael drew a picture of a race car and labeled it “JSiOtZPCAMROT” with a lot of convincing from me that he could write. At this time Michael was able to write using random strings of upper and lower case letters. When he read the entry back to me, he read it as “dragsters.” I strongly encouraged him to do the picture first since this was something he could do well with confidence. I also wanted him to know he could do the picture first if that was his choice. I was pleased that he made an attempt to write using what he knew about written language.

After a few weeks of school, Michael was writing by drawing first in his journal and then labeling his picture with print. Michael was attempting to write a word or two with my help in listening for the sounds that he heard. This was much more than he had done in the previous one and a half years. One of the first sentences Michael attempted to write by himself was a response to a science activity. Michael chose to draw first. However, it was interesting to note that he did not color his picture, perhaps because he was focusing most of his attention on the writing. Michael wrote, “OOD apple jDSS oots tskd.” He read this back as, “The apple juice was good.” Michael found the word “apple” on a science word chart and he wrote the rest by himself. Michael used a mixture of upper and lower case letters. He also demonstrated a few beginning and many final sounds of words. For example, he used the letter “j” for the beginning and “s” for the ending of “juice”. It also appears that Michael heard the beginning of “was” and the end of “good” when he wrote “tskd.” The classroom environment, along with the reading and writing activities had provided Michael with repeated

demonstrations of what sentences look and sound like. Michael was applying that knowledge by writing sentences.

Soon after this, I felt Michael was ready to begin using invented spelling more often since he displayed some knowledge of sound/symbol relationships through daily writing and when tested in isolation, so I really tried to encourage him to listen for the sounds in words when he wrote. With help, Michael was able to demonstrate knowledge of the middle and ending sound of the first word he attempted. For example, in his sentence he wrote “om” for “home”. This was another step in becoming an independent writer.

After we began to label the room, I observed Michael having difficulty stretching out sounds using his fingers and estimating word length for words the class spelled inventively together. Michael had a tendency to over-exaggerate the sounds of individual letters, thus thinking every word was long in length. Through the use of daily modeling by me and sometimes by other students, Michael gained more knowledge about letters and sounds. This helped him become more proficient at estimating word length, which in turned helped him use invented spelling.

In addition to labeling the room and incorporating the Word Wall during the first few weeks of school, the students also wrote parallel books in reading and number word books in math. Parallel books were books which were rewritten by the students using the same structure of a recently-read book. The characters or objects were changed in the student version, but the predictable text would remain. Our math number word books were another way to incorporate reading and

writing with math. For each number word, the students generated a sentence to match the number, and an illustration to match the sentence. At first, all of the students, including Michael, dictated their sentences to me for these kinds of books.

As I observed Michael's daily writing, I knew he would be capable of using invented spelling more often if he possessed more alphabetic knowledge. By October, I did not have one student who knew all letter names and sounds so I felt it was appropriate to spend some time explicitly teaching and working on the alphabet. The letters that were introduced were dependent upon the results of the letter identification portion of the Marie Clay observation survey (1993). Since my focus was on providing meaningful contexts for learning skills such as the alphabet I decided to provide instruction which included the reading of many different types of alphabet books. We also created a class alphabet book which was written through the use of interactive writing, we wrote alliteration books, made alphabet sacks, and wrote individual alphabet books which were parallel to the story of Brown Bear, Brown Bear by Bill Martin, Jr (1983). Each time we studied a particular letter, the students would take home an alphabet sack in which they were asked to bring something to school the next day which began with the appropriate letter sound. Students then wrote about this item in their parallel alphabet book. During the alphabet unit, students were strongly encouraged to develop writing strategies like drawing and invented spelling.

Although the alphabet unit helped Michael become more familiar with letter names and sounds, as the year progressed it was evident that this was not enough

for him. So, I made Michael alphabet letter flash cards using different fonts and colors, and I provided a tape recording for each set. Thus Michael was able to use his auditory and tactile strengths for additional reinforcement of letter knowledge by tracing over the letters while he listened and responded with the tape. This was the key in helping Michael finally learn alphabet knowledge. By the end of January, Michael knew all but one of his letter names (q), all letter sounds in isolation, and scored a 35/37 on a sentence dictation spelling task (Clay, 1993). This knowledge shown in isolation would later be transferred to daily writing as well.

During the fall semester Michael continued to choose to draw his pictures first with great detail and then to write using invented spelling. Usually words that were long or had unpredictable or unusual spelling patterns left Michael feeling frustrated due to the time it took him to write the word. When Michael became overwhelmed with the process of using invented spelling for more difficult words, he needed a little more support. When writing interactively or when conferencing with Michael individually, I would leave “word spaces” for Michael to fill in the words he knew and then I would help him either by writing the more difficult word or by sounding it out sound by sound with him. Later, as Michael continued to have difficulty determining the length of words, I began to leave “letter spaces” for words Michael needed to sound out and spell independently. This helped him to “have a go” at the word by giving him a visual aid so he knew how many sounds to listen for.

Over time, Michael began to do the writing first, followed by the drawing. It seemed that his focus had changed from the picture to the writing. When I asked him about this change during a writing interview, he replied that he wanted to do the story first because drawing was fun and he wanted to do that last. I also inferred that this was a step of writing maturity for Michael as he was able to rely more upon memory to write his story as opposed to using his picture as a prompt.

By the second semester, Michael was usually willing to write, especially after listening to a story or participating in a science or social studies activity. He was at a point where he could write independently using invented spelling with just a small amount of encouragement from me. Michael demonstrated that he could hear the initial, middle, and final sounds in words. He also could use upper and lower case letters appropriately for words he had already stored in his memory. For example, he wrote in his journal, "I like my KDK.," for "I like my cake." Michael began to demonstrate consistency in his use of invented spelling by spelling an unknown word the same way each time he wrote it. For example, he wrote "wior" for "water" consistently in his journal. This showed that he was paying attention to the visual features of words by remaining consistent. Michael represented all consonant sounds that he could hear and some long vowel sounds in his invented spelling (e.g., "koko" for "cocoa" and "pants" for "pants") and was willing to write short paragraphs independently in his journal. For example, "I wd jc hit koko. I wd ent srp. I wd et ol dae." This was read back as, "I would drink hot cocoa. I would eat soup. I would eat all day."

For words that gave him difficulty, I helped him spell using analogies with a word he already knew, or I guided him to use the journal dictionary of common and Word Wall words for the sounds he was stuck on. Michael began to use the journal dictionary consistently which allowed him to be and feel more independent.

Michael began to take an interest in personal writing by producing letters to his mom. In his initial writing interview (see Appendix A), Michael had stated that he liked to write about his family; this was evident in his topic choices throughout the year. He wrote the following letter to his mom independently at the writing center, "Der mom I lov you." Michael was very excited about his work as he shared it with me and couldn't wait to give it to his mom.

Another strategy Michael employed toward the end of the second semester, was to underline all of the words in his writing to help him keep his place. It is possible that Michael started to do this because I underlined words for students to help them keep their places as they read their sentences back. It appeared to be a useful strategy for Michael; he frequently went back to reread his sentences before writing the next word.

Throughout the year, every student had a day of the week to share personal information orally or to share writing. One day, uncharacteristically, Michael did not want to share anything orally, but was very excited about sharing his writing. This was very unusual for Michael since he generally received a lot of attention during his personal sharing time. The fact that he wanted to share only his writing really spoke of how proud he was of his writing.

I observed major changes in Michael's writing progress by the end of the year. He wrote complete sentences and even paragraphs using invented spelling and he began to require very little teacher help. Michael also began to use detailed language especially after a group reading activity. During one instance, Michael used words such as "delectable", "crisp", and "shiny" in a poem about apples. Michael seemed to enjoy using a variety of words and playing with language, especially when he received some help. The use of a word chart seemed to help his creative juices flow.

During Michael's final writing interview (see Appendix C), it was evident that Michael's opinions about writing had changed. When asked how he felt about writing, he changed from listing words he could write to stating that he was a good writer. He said he could write two or three sentences, letters, and stories. Michael still felt he was best at drawing pictures, but said he now chose to save the drawing for last. When I asked Michael why he was a good writer, he stated because he makes spaces between words, writes letters good, listens for the sounds, and uses the word wall. When I asked Michael about good writers in the classroom he named two other classmates and himself. He stated that they were good writers because they leave spaces, make their letters right, and their writing makes sense. These comments indicate that Michael was still focused on the mechanics of good writing, instead of on the process or the content. I hope that with another year of writing success, he will value the content and the process of writing as much as the product. Michael also shared in his final interview that he liked sharing his stories with his classmates. He stated that the other kids told

him he had good writing and that he wrote a lot. Michael also enjoyed working with a partner.

In summary, at the end of third grade, Michael felt comfortable and secure about reading and writing. His sight word vocabulary increased from about six words at the beginning of the year to approximately 106 at the end. This was great progress considering that he had retained only four or five words from the previous school year. Michael was able to become a reader and writer by the end of the year because he had been allowed to make choices about what, when, and how he wanted to communicate his thoughts. He was rewarded with the knowledge that he could indeed hold the interest of others by expressing himself through writing, as well as through speaking.

Shelley's Progress

Shelley was in first grade and in my self-contained special education class for the second year. She had been diagnosed with a primary learning disability and secondary speech and language disability. If you asked Shelley what she ate last night or what she played, she might respond with a color or number word. These were words she had access to; she knew she needed to respond, but she was not always certain how to. Shelley worked with the speech therapist once a week on receptive and expressive language skills. She came from a middle class, mainstream home and was the youngest of four children. Her parents were very supportive and responsive in meeting her educational needs. Shelley loved reading and writing and often brought books and personal writings from home to share at school. She mostly relied upon dictation for her writing. Shelley was a nonreader

at the beginning of the year, only retaining one sight word. She was able to retell a story, but responded inferentially to stories with inappropriate and off-topic answers.

In her initial writing interview (see Appendix A), Shelley stated that she liked to write at home and play school. When asked to tell me some things that she could write, she mentioned several items such as: beast, dragonheart, the, chair, and kitty. She also mentioned items she saw displayed in the room like: book, tape recorder and gumballs from the homework charts. When I asked Shelley to show me what she could write she wrote “tcwDMB” and she read this back as “dragon”. It was evident that she understood that the print represented an idea because she used a string of letters to represent her thoughts. At this time, she was not able to demonstrate any sound/symbol relationships and appeared to be stringing letters together randomly, which was quite normal for her age and stage of writing development. Shelley had a positive view of herself and stated that she was a good writer because she was smart. She answered that her favorite things to write were letters and cards. Shelley answered direct and specific questions such as “What can you write?”; but had great difficulty responding to questions that asked her to explain how or why. Most of the time, she needed an example of how to respond.

Shelley began the year by drawing before writing, which again was developmentally appropriate for her age. Her pictures were always very positive and happy, with many bright colors. Her mother commented on how this was an improvement from preschool where she only used the color black for her

drawings. When Shelley began writing simple sentences a week into the school year, she demonstrated her knowledge of the sight words by using them repeatedly. For example, the words I and like appeared often in her daily writing. For other words, she used random letters.

Shelley's first journal entry was as follows: "I like tctt mtc, tc." She read this back as, "I like to swing on the swingset." Throughout the first month of school Shelley drew and wrote enthusiastically in her journal, always proud of her work. At the end of the first month she continued to use a few sight words and to string letters together to form words, but was not yet representing each word, leaving spaces between words, nor demonstrating sound/symbol relationships.

By mid-October Shelley was beginning to hear and represent initial, middle, and final consonant sounds. For example, one day she wrote the word "grandmas" as "gmvczs". I thought this was very impressive and was pleased with Shelley's growth. In addition to beginning to represent sounds, Shelley also began to write complete sentences using spaces between words and adding punctuation. Shelley used the Word Wall avidly to write words and only asked for help spelling some hard words. She was an excellent problem solver and used charts and other print materials in the room whenever she could. There were times when Shelley had difficulty spelling a word that was displayed in the room; with a few prompts from me she was usually able to find the word. Another strategy which seemed to help Shelley was to provide her with letter spaces. Knowing the number of letters in each word often helped Shelley spell.

Shelley's writing development continued to progress after a mini-lesson which focused on using invented spelling and the elements of a well-developed story. The story Shelley wrote soon after this included an introduction, a middle, and an ending. Her story accompanied a blizzard scene she had drawn using colored chalk. The story was written as follows, "I see snow. Dad put on lits. I see how wet to Lacey home." She read this back as, "I see snow. Dad put on lights. It was too wet to take Lacey home." After listening to Shelley read her story, I felt she had incorporated the information presented during our mini-lesson into her writing. Shelley's story was long enough and included necessary details to keep the interest of her audience.

In addition to increased story development, Shelley later began using other new strategies and techniques. She searched the Word Wall for words that closely matched the word she wanted to use. For example, she used the word "what" for the word "won't", by matching the first and last sounds. Shelley began to form all of her letter "a's" to match the font of the computer. She also demonstrated her awareness of quotation marks by "overusing" them in her writing. For example, in one journal entry she wrote: " 'I what look at' my goe hoos." She read this back as: "I won't look at my dog's house." Shelley was developing more awareness of the print used in the classroom and incorporating what she felt was more important in her writing. She continued to add new skills and use new strategies every week.

Even while I was pleased with Shelley's writing development, I still needed to address the challenge of her language disability. Shelley had a difficult time

expressing what she meant through oral and written language. One example came when students were asked to journal about how people are alike and different as part of a social studies unit. As a class we made a chart and brainstormed the many different characteristics of people and classified them as making us different and alike. Shelley wrote in her journal that people were different because they eat food. My initial reaction to this entry was that it didn't make sense and that Shelley was writing something totally out of context. On this particular day I decided to ask Shelley to discuss this entry with me and as I probed her thinking I learned that she was responding appropriately to the topic. Shelley explained that people were different because we all like and eat different foods. This was a real eye-opening experience for me. It allowed me to realize that it was possible that Shelley understood more than I thought and was trying her best to respond appropriately. She just needed more time and experience at expressing herself so that others could understand her point of view.

One day I asked Shelley if she felt she was getting better at writing. She stated that she was. I asked her what she was getting better at with her writing and she responded that she was getting better at playing doctors. This is another example of the difficulty Shelley had in understanding questions of this kind. Looking back on this incident, it appears that Shelley may have been trying to receive and understand my question by putting it into a context that she understood, which was playing. At the time, I tried to provide additional prompts or questions so that Shelley could answer the question. This proved unsuccessful, and she became frustrated and shut down, refusing to answer any more questions. Shelley

knew she was not able to give me the information I wanted and this was frustrating to her. I decided to stop prompting Shelley and try again another day.

Another example of her inability to express herself in a way that was understood or accepted by others was her story which corresponded with a math/art shape activity. After studying shapes and creating artwork using construction paper shapes, Shelley wrote the following to describe her work: "I will go to my zekowaba. I like my gesrk." She read this back as: "I will go to my shapes. I like my shapes." I did not feel that Shelley was describing her work, but was instead talking about shapes. Another thing that perplexed me was the inconsistency in spelling the word shapes and that it appeared that she did not use her knowledge of sounds while spelling this word. I accepted her approximation on this day. I also accepted that Shelley responded to her shape art work as she wanted to and that she was not yet consistent in her willingness to try using invented spelling with every word at this point.

To help Shelley learn to process and respond to different types of questions, I included a "Question of the Day" activity. The question of the day was usually related to the season, thematic unit or another area of interest to the students. I varied the question format from day to day and had the students read the question with me and called upon different students to answer the question daily. Many of the questions provided an opportunity for each student to respond, to ensure that Shelley would benefit from the activity. The students really enjoyed the question of the day because they could express their own opinions. By listening

to the responses, Shelley received the demonstrations and examples she needed as a model for her own responses.

Over the holidays, the students wrote thank-you notes to their parents for all they receive from them. Instead of writing something authentic, Shelley copied names off items in her crayon box. When I asked her to read them back, she was unable to and became very frustrated. Even after a discussion with her about things she could be thankful for, she was unclear as what to write. I finally helped her by suggesting certain things her parents might have provided for her and she chose some of those to include in her letter. Shelley had earlier been able to write independently, but, due to her frustration with the task, she needed more help on that day. I wondered if this behavior was developmentally appropriate for a student her age. After additional reading about the natural stages of writing development (Calkins, 1986; Weaver, 1980), I also learned that copying environmental print was indeed a natural stage of development. In the past I had never had students copy words from the environment. Most of my students had relied upon teacher dictation and had never had the opportunities to do this kind of problem solving. This was definitely new territory for me. I inferred that because Shelley was frustrated with the writing task I had given her that day she decided to copy words off items in her pencil box and other surroundings as a coping strategy. This way, she was at least writing something. When I look back at this event, I realize that it was better for Shelley to "write" something than to throw a fit and refuse to try to write anything. I also wonder if Shelley would

have had less difficulty writing that day if I had given her more choice in selecting her topic or mode for communicating thanks to her parents.

Shelley's writing development continued to improve as the year progressed; however, we continued to struggle with her inconsistent ability to respond on topic. Shelley often chose to respond in a different direction than the one I had suggested. Most of my students needed quite a bit of guidance regarding choice of topic. Weaver (1980) states that this often happens when older children haven't been given the opportunity to write everyday. To provide some guidance, I still incorporated a lot of planning and preparation for writing activities to enable all students to respond with writing. For example, I would often follow the sharing of a piece of literature with a discussion and/or some other extension activity that resulted in a list of words related to the subject. For students who were still unable to get started I would suggest a story starter or idea, such as: "You can write in your journals about how you get dressed to play outside in the snow like Froggy in the book, or you can write about a time when you played in the snow and what you did." At this point, most of my students needed this extra step.

The challenge with Shelley was that she was ready to take off on her own with topics and I became a little upset when she responded "off" topic according to direction I had planned that my students would take. For example, one day I read books about playing outside in the snow and I shared some story starters with the students. All of the students used the story starters except Shelley, who wrote in her journal, "I played outside in the snow." When she read this back to me, at first I was disappointed because I felt Shelley hadn't listened or understood what

I wanted her to write and had simply stated something she liked to do. I did not accept her response and praised her for her efforts as she wrote independently, used invented spelling and drew a wonderful picture to match. As I look back on that day, I realize that Shelley came up with her own response which was more important to her than the ones I may have felt were appropriate or correct, and that it didn't matter if she described what she wears to play outside as long as her response was meaningful to her.

I realized that I had begun to accept the level of writing the students were capable of at the time, allowed them to draw first, use music and art as prompts, allow them to work with partners, and had given them more independence in writing than ever before. But, I still had some room to grow in providing opportunities for student responsibility and choice.

As I began to allow Shelley more freedom and choice, her stories began to fill an entire page in her journal. She also began to write her stories before drawing. For example, one day she wrote the following entry: "I will yuow TV and yuow TV and hvet elt cak and cow up wow my blact." She read this back as follows: "I will watch T.V. and watch T.V. and have eat cake and cover up with my blanket." Shelley followed this writing with a wonderfully elaborate picture. I was very impressed with her attempt at expressing herself by conveying that she would watch a lot of television. I know this is what she meant because I asked her to explain how much T.V. she planned on watching and she said she would watch it a lot. The thing I was concerned about was the fact that she included three ideas in one sentence and repeated herself. Shelley needed to continue to work on

semantics and structure. I decided to address exactly how I would approach this concern regarding Shelley with my graduate advisor. I did so, because I was still uncertain at this point whether I should try to have Shelley work on proofreading and editing her writing with my help, or if I should still accept her approximations because she was doing such a nice job of writing independently, and enjoying it. I was somewhat afraid that if I “questioned” her work and changed it from the way she wrote it, she would become frustrated and no longer be enthusiastic. My advisor and I concluded that a good way to work on this problem would be through mini-lessons and by having the students work on editing stories with similar problems with a partner.

A few days later I conducted a mini-lesson for which I had generated stories with run-on and structurally incorrect sentences for the students to revise with a partner. I asked them to help me “fix up” a story. Together, we revised the story and made it “more readable.” Next, for practice I paired students with similar writing skills to work on one of my other stories. I paired Tim and Shelley together and they had some difficulty detecting the lack of structural correctness of the sentences in their story. After repeated readings, they both thought the phrase which Shelley used often in her stories “have drink” sounded fine. At this point, I was especially frustrated because I had included this phrase in my model story and the other students had known right away this didn’t sound right and suggested that I change it. However, the lesson did have its successes. Other students in the room were successful, and after that lesson Shelley began to break her ideas into individual sentences.

A few weeks later Shelley wrote: "I like to woc TV at home. I like to woc Tv and my favrat tme is hocy." She read this back as follows: "I like to watch T.V. at home. I like to watch T.V. and my favorite team is hockey." Shelley worked very hard to make this entry understandable to the listener.

Toward the end of the third quarter, I felt that both Shelley's self-confidence and her writing ability had improved enough that I could guide her into proofreading and revising her stories independently for appropriate semantics and structure. Although she continued to improve in this area, she was not always consistent. Shelley was proud of her writing and felt that her pieces were finished, so I often left it at that. As time progressed, however, she did begin to revise her stories by correctly adding and changing words and phrases.

By the end of March Shelley knew over 50 Dolch sight words, was reading early first grade material with meaning, participated successfully in class discussions, had gained more confidence in her ability to participate and share with the class, and demonstrated knowledge of the concepts of words, sentences, and punctuation in her writing. Each day Shelley continued to write longer stories which made sense and she showed attempts to proofread her work individually. Her love for reading and writing had remained throughout the year; her mom stated, "She writes whenever she can." Shelley started to write books at home, and wrote one for the class over spring break. She stated at her final writing interview (see Appendix C) that she still enjoyed drawing the pictures first; she also shared that she was a good writer, and that she liked to write a lot.

Conclusion and Implications for Teachers

In conclusion, I felt the year was successful because all of my students improved their writing and reading skills. I feel that because my students had opportunities to decide when, what and how to write through a variety of writing activities, they increased their self-confidence and writing ability. In addition because the students were given opportunities to write across the content areas of reading, language, math, science, and social studies. They learned that writing and reading are a part of everything we do each day in life. Students saw that writing is not just limited to a "writing" time, but is done throughout the day and is an important means of communication and just as important as oral speech.

Because the students experienced the conditions of learning necessary for written language development (Cambourne, 1988), their self-esteem and their self-awareness increased. By the end of the year, all students were capable and willing to express themselves through written language.

In addition to providing the students with the necessary conditions for learning written language last year, literacy instruction also changed. Instruction in reading and written language more closely matched whole-language philosophies as opposed to the teacher controlled skill and drill that had been employed in years past. For example, students were given reading materials at their instructional level, which helped them develop sight vocabulary which is an important component for learning to write independently, as well as read. Students were allowed to use invented spelling and experiment with the many different forms of written language, to get a feel for their own style. Mechanical, technical and

structural skills like spelling, correct punctuation, and a smooth flowing story were taught through mini-lessons with authentic pieces of writing as student need arose. I no longer decided a certain sequence of skills to teach to children through a one-shot approach using meaningless worksheets and drills. I recognized that through observing student writing, I would be able to see the skills that needed extra demonstration and guidance from me. Because students were writing real things like letters, stories and books they recognized that writing has a purpose; it is real. This provided the meaningful context necessary for learning literacy.

Next year, I know that I need to allow my students even more freedom in topic selection. If a student decides to take a different direction in writing than the ones that I suggest, that will be perfectly acceptable. I will continue to change my ways of thinking about teacher control and direction my students are capable of generating ideas to write about. They will learn most effectively if they are allowed and encouraged to respond to their world in ways that are meaningful to them. When I provide my students with more freedom, this in turn provides me with more freedom. What a wonderful gift for all of us.

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Appendix A

Initial Writing Interview

1. Tell me about yourself as a writer.
2. Tell me some things that you can write.
-Show me what you can write.
3. Are you good at some kinds of writing?
-What is it that makes you good?
4. Are some kinds of writing hard?
-What makes it hard?
5. How do you feel about writing?
-When do you feel this way?
6. What is your favorite thing to write?
7. What are your favorite things to write about?
8. What kinds of things do you write at school?
9. When do you usually write at school?
10. Does anyone help you write at school?
-Who?
11. When would you like to write during school?
12. Where do you usually write at school?
13. Where would you like to write at school?
14. What materials do you usually use while you are writing?
15. What else would you like to write with?

16. When you write, do you like to do the pictures or the story first?

Why?

17. Do you ever write during math, science, social studies, reading, art, story time, writing or journal time?

-any other times?

18. Tell me some things around the classroom/school which were written by teachers or students.

19. Are any kids in your class/school good writers?

Who?

20. What do they do that makes them good writers?

21. What would you like to learn to become a better writer?

Appendix B

Writing Progress Interview

The child was directed to choose 3 pieces of their writing that they wanted to share with me. While reviewing each piece of writing, the students were asked the following questions.

1. Why did you choose this piece of writing?
2. What do you like about it?
3. What did you do really well or better than you used to do with this piece of writing?
4. What can you improve on or become better at when writing?
 - Did you share this writing with others?
 - How did others feel about your writing?
5. Do you feel that you are getting better at writing?
6. Tell me about the materials you used to do the writing and pictures.
7. Did you do the picture or the writing first?

Appendix C

Final Writing Interview

1. Tell me about yourself as a writer.
 - Tell me what you do best as a writer.
2. Tell me some things that you can write.
 - Show me some things that you can write.
3. Are you good at some kinds of writing?
 - What is it that makes you good?
4. How do you feel about writing?
 - When do you feel this way?
5. Who can help you the best with writing?
 - How do they help you?
6. When you write, do you like to do the pictures or the story first?
 - Why?
 - Did you write first, or do the pictures first at the beginning of the year?
7. Are any kids in your class/school good writers?
 - Who?
8. What do they do that makes them good writers?
9. Do you feel you have become a better writer?
 - What makes you say that?
 - What have you become better at doing since the beginning of the year?
10. What have you learned from helping me fix my stories this year?
11. Did you like sharing your stories/writing with the class?

12. What have you learned from your friends after sharing your writing?
13. What kinds of advice did you give to your friends after they shared their writing?
14. Do you like working with a friend when writing?