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Nurturing at-risk students' writing abilities

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Abstract

The purpose of this journal article was to review current professional literature on the writing process and the importance of voice in writing and then to design and implement a writing program for at-risk sixth grade students. The writing process is an effective means for children to create meaning, especially for at-risk students.

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**Nurturing At-Risk Students'
Writing Abilities**

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Abstract

The purpose of this journal article was to review current professional literature on the writing process and the importance of voice in writing and then to design and implement a writing program for at-risk sixth grade students. The writing process is an effective means for children to create meaning, especially for at-risk students.

In the writing process, the writer's voice gives the best sense of a writer's potential. This driving force was the basis of the instructional project in writing developed for at-risk sixth grade students.

Recent attention has been given to the writing process as a means of creating meaning. Writing is not a single, simple task: It is a recursive process in which writers move back and forth among the components--selecting a topic, drafting, redrafting, revising and publishing. Writing demands constant reviewing of the information being created through the process (Graves, 1983).

Reading and writing are acts of composing. Readers bring their background of knowledge to compose meaning from the text; writers use their background of knowledge to compose meaning into text (Murray, 1982; Butler & Turbill, 1984).

Nurturing the Writing Process

The process of writing begins almost as an intimate conversation (Graves, 1994). The act of writing might be described as communication between two workmen muttering to each other at the workbench. The self speaks, the other self listens and responds; the self proposes, the other self considers; the self composes, the other self evaluates. The two selves, the speaker and the listener, collaborate: A problem is identified, discussed, and defined; solutions are proposed, rejected, suggested, attempted, tested, discarded, and accepted (Murray, 1982).

Children learn to control writing as their teachers model the process. Then, children can view the control of the process as shaping ideas in a clear, concise manner and as a long process

with energy supplied along the way through the joy of discovery (Graves, 1983).

According to Hansen (1987), students in order to develop *writing abilities and to understand the writing process need time to write*. Writers need time to keep a piece of writing alive through engaging in the recursive process and interacting with teachers and peers concerning the meaning they are trying to achieve.

Writing workshops offer children the opportunity to interact with others. When students share their writing that is progressing well, it serves as a stimulus for others in the class. A strong voice is contagious, and this interaction helps at-risk children find their own voice when writing (Graves, 1983).

To assess a process, it needs to be described through qualitative means. Several assessment techniques that support each other can be used. One such descriptive technique is the student journal that can become a secure, valued place for children to explore language, feelings, and life's happenings in many forms and receive feedback from the teacher. Journaling can promote student reflections, thereby ordering thoughts and serving as a written record of student progress and instructional needs (Routman, 1994). Another means of descriptive assessment, the student-teacher conference, promotes student-teacher

collaboration in noting progress and in setting further goals for learning (Frank, 1994).

The portfolio, another descriptive assessment technique, is an ongoing collection of works, selected by each student to show the efforts, interests, growth, and instructional needs in developing writing abilities (Frank, 1994). It provides collaborative reflection by the teacher and the student over time (Valencia, 1990).

Voice in the Writing Process

The voice is the part of the self that assists the writer in continuing his/her involvement in the writing process. Voice shows how a writer chooses information, organizes it, and selects the words in relation to what is to be said and how it is to be said. Studies have shown if a writer makes a good choice of subject, his/her voice booms through. Writing improves when the voice is strong. The writer's voice gives the best sense of his/her potential when writing (Graves, 1994).

Murray (1992) relates that voice is the most important element in writing. It illuminates fact, clarifies confusing information, makes something out of the ordinary, and attracts and holds readers by compelling them to think and feel. Four basic elements appear in an effective voice: angle of vision, precision of language, position of information, and the music of the text. Voice begins with the *angle of vision*, or the writer's

view of the subject. The writer's background of experiences, knowledge of the subject, and attitude toward the subject combine to affect the angle of vision.

Precision of language is the selection of the right word in relation to the words surrounding it. The words writers choose and the position of the words in phrases, sentences, and paragraphs limit the subject and force the reader to concentrate on the specific elements of the writing. A lively voice depends on specific revealing details.

Position of information through language provides emphasis, pace, and flow. A carefully developed sequence can allow the reader to achieve a logical understanding of the text. Voice adjusts the pace of the text to clarify meaning and anticipates the readers' need for information and their questions and their response to them. The last element, *music of the text*, clarifies and communicates the meaning of the text.

Voice is not a process component but is the driving force of the writing process influencing all the components. Students who attend to voice are more able to extend a unique message to their audience. Teachers who note students' voices listen for their voices in their writing and, as a result, can more clearly understand their meaning and observe how they use process components (Graves, 1994).

Teachers need to encourage voice because it is the most personal quality in writing. A writer's voice reveals the writer; therefore, a writer must accept self and write in the way that reflects that self. Teachers and students need to recognize and respect differences in voice (Murray, 1992).

Writing Programs for At-Risk Students

Students at-risk usually have several factors in their lives that influence their lack of identification with schooling and/or their lack of academic success (Crosby, 1993). In planning writing programs for children at-risk, consideration of ways to foster each student's voice is a major goal. Finding one's unique voice nurtures literacy and also facilitates peer interaction. A need of many at-risk children is to interact with peers. Coming to realize one's worth through engaging in the writing process can help a student gain confidence in sharing writing with peers and can further peer acceptance. This interaction can energize the student to pursue writing, thus extending literacy. The opportunity to share writing allows students to extend their personal-social abilities as well as their literacy (Murray, 1992).

Several literacy programs that have addressed at-risk children's learning needs offer valuable insights. For example, a teacher in Virginia accepted the challenge of improving the literacy of at-risk seventh and eighth graders. The program's

goal was to improve the reading and writing of students who functioned below grade level and failed Virginia's Literacy Passport Test in Reading and Writing. Past teachers believed these students had the ability to succeed in school, but they suffered from low self-esteem and motivation. At the beginning of the year, the teacher conducted interviews with the students designated to be at-risk to determine their attitudes toward reading and writing. She started the sessions of the program by reading aloud to the students. Oral discussions and written predictions followed the reading aloud. She developed reading-writing workshops or assigned pairs of peers, that extended the read aloud sessions and accompanying discussions with writing. Mini-lessons conducted by the teacher offered instruction in the tasks of reading and the components of writing. The students also read to kindergarten and first grade children. As a result, the students gained confidence in their own reading and writing abilities. Fourteen out of sixteen students passed the reading-writing literacy tests at the end of the school year (Robb, 1993). Reviewing the report of this instructional development project to improve the literacy of early adolescents who were at-risk, these essential ingredients for success were included: modeling of language through read aloud sessions, much student involvement in the reading and writing processes, much student interaction with others focused

on reading and writing experiences, and instructional sessions to extend literacy tasks. The aspects of this program are recommended by Cambourne (1988), Goodman (1986), Smith (1994), and Routman (1994).

The Book Buddies Project in New York assigned eight- and nine-year-old children at-risk of reading failure to university students in a master's program in education as book partners. The goal was to create enthusiasm in reading and writing. The children were to share books with adults and to learn about story elements of folktales through webbing. Webbing was chosen as one activity to extend the children's thinking-language abilities throughout reading and writing processes. This technique helped the students to organize and integrate important information as they constructed elements of the stories in the reading and writing processes. The results revealed improvement in the children's writing. Story elements were more clearly defined in their book reports and journals. The students enjoyed writing and sharing their journals with other students. Children in this project had opportunities to interact with adults and receive positive feedback about their reading. Also, they had metalinguage sessions: They learned about the elements of language in a genre and then applied this knowledge to their reading and writing experiences (Bramble, Winters, & Schlimmer, 1994). Such a practice is encouraged by Smith (1994).

Three elementary teachers in Athens, Georgia concerned about their at-risk students explored alternatives to retention and ways to build self-esteem through instructional changes. Their instructional development project provided many opportunities for students to read and write about what was important to them. The children wrote about their lives and the solutions to problems. University students, assigned to the children as pen pals, supported them in their reading and writing activities and encouraged their risk-taking. These components contributed to the students' success. The teachers reported convincing data from their study to indicate that this instructional development project made a tremendous difference in their students' school lives. The students displayed an increase in risk-taking and effective membership in the school community (Allen, Michalove, Shockley, & West, 1991). The project offered many opportunities for children to read and write. Such activity is supported by Smith's statement (1994), language is learned through engagement in the processes. Graves (1994) emphasizes that the most meaningful experiences for children are those related closely to their lives.

Implementation of a Writing Workshop

I teach a diverse group of students in my sixth grade classroom. These students come from different economic, social, and ethnic backgrounds. The students' abilities include gifted,

average ability, special education, and ESL. Many of these students are at-risk as a result of various conditions present in their lives. They have experienced difficulties from family problems, low socio-economic situations, and English as a second language. The students have had difficulty writing effectively when given written assignments in school. These at-risk students have had difficulty finding their voice when writing. They have struggled with the elements of voice--angle of vision, precision of language, position of information, and music of the text.

A survey was given to the students the first day of the workshops to determine their ideas, attitudes, and experience regarding writing. The students noted that a quiet environment was necessary to write effectively. The at-risk students also stated they did not like to write and did not consider themselves to be authors.

The students were assigned to small peer groups, or writers workshops. These workshops were to help students focus on their problems with written language. The teacher explained the workings of a writing workshop to the students. They discussed the roles and expectations of each student and the teacher so the workshops would meet the needs of the students. Once the students were aware of the procedures to follow during the writing workshops, they were anxious to experience this style of language instruction. They were given the opportunity to write fiction,

nonfiction, and poetry. The teacher provided folders for each of the students to house their daily writing and for portfolios to collect exhibits representing their ongoing progress and instructional needs.

Teacher-directed and student-initiated activities extended the students' understanding of the elements of voice.

Angle of Vision

The teacher presented several activities to strengthen the students' angle of vision. Quality literature pieces were read aloud to the students to stimulate ideas. Many Patricia Polacco books were read and discussed. A search was made to find out the sources of the author's ideas for her books. It was discovered that her personal experiences provided the ideas for her writings. The teacher also read many of the Arthur books by Marc Brown. Students noted the simple story line of Brown's books and his child-like voice when writing. These books were used to compare the different writing styles of the two authors. Many other authors were also presented including Tony Johnston, Cynthia Rylant, Karen Ackerman, Eve Bunting, and Jane Yolen.

An author/illustrator center, maintained throughout the year, served as a reference for biographical information about authors. The students were able to discover how noted authors find topics when writing stories.

A reading center with shelves of books, fiction and nonfiction, from many authors provided students with different models of writing styles. From these experiences, students could be prompted to find their own stories. From this collection, the teacher modeled how to choose a topic to write about based on personal experiences and examples of works by various authors and then how to choose the genre of the piece.

The poetry center provided a reference of different forms for the students. Also, poetry books served as models of poetry as well as pleasurable listening/reading experiences.

Precision of Language

The teacher modeled how to write the initial draft of a story. She stressed that it was important to quickly write thoughts on paper while the ideas were flowing freely. Once the ideas were written, then the writer could fine tune the piece by choosing more specific vocabulary to achieve the meaning that the author wanted to portray to the reader. The students displayed frustrations in choosing the most appropriate vocabulary. They shared their problems with the teacher. Also, the members of their workshop groups assisted in selecting vocabulary.

Position of Information and Music of the Text

The position of information provides the emphasis, pace, and flow for writing. The teacher modeled through her own writing how changes could be made to create an interesting flow of

language that resulted in a more musical quality and a clarification of the text. Students met with partners or their workshops to share aloud their writings. Reading aloud their writing and listening to recordings of their pieces gave the students opportunities to hear the music of their language and to do redrafting to extend the flow of the piece. Much poetry was read aloud by the teacher and the students as examples of the song of the language. Pairs of students frequently read poetry aloud to each other in the poetry center. To overcome the idea that poetry has to rhyme but needs rhythm, forms that do not rhyme were introduced, such as cinquain and haiku.

Conclusions

As voice in writing was studied, the students began to display confidence in the ideas they created through the writing process. They began to share their work with others in the classroom with enthusiasm. Activity in the peer workshop increased. They expressed a desire to write several short stories to continue adventures with the same characters, as they noted Marc Brown had done with his series of Arthur books. The students wrote a great deal of poetry, using the different poetry forms that had been introduced during the year. Students were comfortable during conferences with the teacher and readily accepted her guidance to further their writing. They also expressed their thoughts and concerns through journaling with the

teacher. The students utilized the bookmaking center to publish their finished work. They chose from a variety of book styles available to complete this task.

The desire of the students to write quality fiction, nonfiction, and poetry was observed by the teacher. This ownership of writing seemed to empower the students. Their attitudes toward writing seemed to change from skeptical to one of a commitment to succeed.

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