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Integrating writing into a Chapter One reading program in grades seven and eight

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Integrating writing into a Chapter One reading program in grades seven and eight

Abstract

The Chapter One reading program has traditionally consisted of teaching and re-teaching of isolated skills and has included much segmented reading. The small amount of writing that has taken place has been in the form of short answer or fill-in-the blanks activities.

Integrating Writing into a
Chapter One Reading Program
in Grades Seven and Eight

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by
Avis C. Grundman
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The Chapter One reading program has traditionally consisted of teaching and re-teaching of isolated skills and has included much segmented reading. The small amount of writing that has taken place has been in the form of short answer or fill-in-the-blanks activities.

Allington (1983) has found that students of lower reading ability read fewer words, focus on word recognition more than on meaningful text, are frequently interrupted during oral reading, and do more short answer-writing and worksheets than students of higher reading ability. As students progress through the elementary grades, Stanovich (1986) refers to the Matthew effect in reading: The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. To translate, the spread between low achievers and high achievers gets even wider as they advance through school. These findings reflect limited reading-writing experiences for many students in Chapter One programs.

Much research has focused on the processes of reading and writing during the past two decades. Research has shown that reading and writing should be viewed as two intertwined processes instead of two distinctly separate subjects. Kenneth and Yetta Goodman (1983) relate, ". . . people not only learn to read by reading and write by writing but they also learn to read by writing and write by reading" (p. 592).

Purpose of the Paper

This paper will review the professional literature concerning the natural relationship between the reading-writing processes and the role of the teacher in supporting both processes. The implications for the integration of writing into a Chapter One reading program in grades seven and eight will be discussed.

Reading-Writing Connection

Learning takes place when activities are purposeful and viewed in a holistic manner. Knowledge is constructed from within. Smith (1983) states that all children are capable of learning to write and read as naturally as they learn to talk, but that something goes wrong in our educational system in nurturing literacy. Cambourne (1988) believes that the natural world provides opportunities for the oral language processes to go into action, but the schools fail to provide natural opportunities for children to engage in the functions of language. He advocates a simple approach that involves teaching reading and writing with the natural ease and flair that is present when children learn to speak and communicate.

Reading and writing are not mirror images of each other, but each supports and enhances performance in the other. Researchers Tierney and Pearson (1983), say that both reading and writing involve the active process of composing meaning. To

comprehend writing, the reader must construct meaning from the writer's words and look for relationships in different parts of the text. The writer composes thoughts into words so that a meaning-bearing message is offered for the intended reader. Both processes of language involve continuous transactions (not extractions) between readers and writers as they try to create meaning. Children draw upon their previous experiences to make sense of texts written by others and to create meaningful written texts for others. Authentic literacy events that are provided in a natural setting will encourage children to draw upon their prior experiences to help create meaning when reading and writing. Reading and writing cannot be segmented into component parts and still remain reading and writing (Altwerger, Edelsky, & Flores, 1991).

Smith (1983) relates that both reading and writing abilities are developed by engaging in the processes of reading and writing. Fluency in both processes comes with years of exposure and practice and not with repetitive and separate exercises and drills.

To facilitate the processes of reading and writing, the teacher must surround children with good literature and suitable writing materials. Butler and Turbill (1987) relate that writing can never be carried out in isolation but results from the welding together of many experiences and the language used

to negotiate these experiences. Therefore, children need exposure to many models from the different genres of literature and other printed materials in order to build up their linguistic storehouses.

Ownership of the entire reading-writing process is vital to the child. The teacher may act as facilitator, but the student must select the topic and then carry out the process of creating meaning. Due to the nature of compensatory programs, it is easy for teachers to interrupt the flow of children's involvement in the language processes.

Calkins (1983) states that writing involves abilities traditionally viewed as reading abilities and that by writing children gain a sense of ownership over their reading. For models of writing, students must read books written not only by authors of good literature, but their own writings and those of their peers. These works should be readily available and displayed. Graves (1983) relates when the language processes and literature are the center of activity, children will take what they understand from material that is available to them no matter how easy or difficult and make it their own. Children are concerned with meaning, and teachers do not need to worry about instructional and frustrational levels.

Blocks of time must be provided to enable children to engage freely in the language processes without their progress

being thwarted by interruptions. Smith (1988) states that a reader's fluency is a function of sustained experiences with printed texts. Atwell (1987) thinks that periods of silent independent reading are perhaps the strongest experience that can demonstrate the value of literacy. She also says that the daily time she allows for independent reading is the most questioned of all her classroom practices, but one she can justify with the assistance of anecdotal records.

Graves (1983) recommends that at least three hours or class periods a week be scheduled for students to think about writing in order to discover meaningful topics. Even when students write each day, growth is slow and does not follow a linear pattern. Each piece may not be an improvement over the last. Atwell (1987) relates that short writing periods rush students, hampering their thinking and restricting the quality of their writing. When students are given time to reflect on prior literacy experiences and to apply new knowledge, they will take risks and, at the same time, take control of their writing. When they consider and reconsider what they have written, children are more likely to achieve the clarity and voice of good writing.

The processes of reading and writing must involve risk-taking. Students' approximations in reading and writing need to be accepted as their experimentations in speaking were

accepted in early childhood. Young children's babbling is considered as a sign of emerging language, yet many children become reluctant readers and writers because experiences in the school environment have led them to fear being wrong. In order for learning to take place, children must take a chance and incur the possibility of being wrong. However, there is nothing to learn if one is certain of being right (Smith, 1988).

Goodman (1986) also states that risk-taking is essential. Approximations are hypotheses to be tested. Prediction should be encouraged as readers try to make sense of print. Writers must be encouraged to think about what they want to say, to experiment with punctuation, to make approximations when spelling, and to explore genres. It must be emphasized to children that miscues and invented spellings are part of the whole learning process that is ongoing. They are not a signal to shutdown reading and writing. There is much to be learned from taking a risk.

Reading and writing must be modeled for students. Graves (1983) stresses the importance of modeling for both teachers and students. Nothing replaces the teacher and students reading and writing together. Students in Chapter One programs are regarded as weak readers and writers, yet rarely have they seen the processes modeled or have they been given an opportunity to write anything but sentence fragments.

Atwell (1987) stresses the value of modeling in writing instruction. She describes how she models writing for students. When she starts with her first draft, she puts her head down and begins. She does not look at her students while she writes and her posture demonstrates that she is serious, busy, and expects students to follow her example. She cautions that modeling will not take effect immediately but over a period of time students learn to make choices and maintain ownership and control over their own reading and writing.

Teachers can employ scaffolding, or collaboration, when modeling the writing process. ("Linguistic scaffolding" refers to temporary structures that a mother uses to adapt to her young child's language gestures and activity. The linguistic scaffold is gradually removed when the baby no longer needs it.) Cheatham (1989) says that scaffolding can be provided for each step in the writing process. Brainstorming, drafting, and editing can all be modeled by supporting children during the task. This support can involve simply thinking aloud about how to do it and then letting the students engage in the task independently as they internalize the process. Further scaffolds can be supplied as reading and writing tasks become more complex.

Conferencing, involving the child, the teacher, and the peer group, has much potential for supporting emerging literacy.

These interactions that involve sharing and responding can extend the reading-writing process. During conferences, children can ask their peers questions about their involvement in the writing process and describe their own writing strategies (Calkins, 1983). Reading and writing need not be completed to be shared. Frequently, students only receive feedback from others concerning their language activity after writing has been finished or a book has been read in its entirety. By then it is too late for much sharing or responding that is related to the process.

Murray (1989) reflects on how writing is a lonely craft. The student needs to have response about work in progress. The teacher should not withhold information that will help with a problem but should try with effective questioning to assist the student in finding a solution. Response and feedback from others can nurture attempts at constructing meaning. In his discussion of scaffolding and conferencing, Graves (1983) lists six elements that should be part of the exchange between the student and teacher over a series of conferences:

1. The child should be able to predict most of what will happen in the conference.
2. The teacher should focus on only one or two features of the child's piece.

3. Teachers must demonstrate solutions rather than tell the child what to do.

4. The child should be able to reverse roles by initiating comments and suggestions and by demonstrating their own solutions.

5. Both the teacher and child need to discuss the writing process and the subject content.

6. There must be a combination of flexible elements in conferencing, such as experimentation, discovery, and humor.

When evaluating the reading and writing processes, a nontraditional method of assessment and record-keeping is necessary. Most standardized tests of reading and writing focus on isolated skills and words, following the same format that reading and writing have been taught in the classroom. If we are going to integrate writing into the reading program, we need to use other methods for evaluation. Goodman (1986) refers to "kid-watching" and states that one can learn much more by careful observing than by formal testing. Children can be evaluated informally while they are discussing, planning, or even playing. A more formal type of evaluation takes place when the teacher and student conference one-on-one about reading and writing. Anecdotal records can be kept by the teacher as a continuous means of evaluation. Student portfolios can be filled with writing samples, reading experience accounts, and

other expressive activities. The emphasis should be on evaluation that takes place naturally as an ongoing part of the classroom environment (Goodman, 1986).

As one reviews the literature concerning process-based reading and writing instruction and the conditions that are necessary for children's emerging literacy to be nurtured, it becomes clear that the different elements of language cannot be separated into clearly defined categories. In a holistic program that emphasizes natural and meaningful expression, much overlap and interaction is present. Cambourne (1988) says that while we can never precisely replicate the conditions for learning to talk in teaching reading and writing, we can replicate the principles that these conditions exemplify. When teachers understand the principles, they can arrange their classrooms to simulate for written language what the world appears to do naturally for oral language.

Implications for Instruction

When integrating writing into a Chapter One reading program in the middle school, all students will not be able to engage in the abstract thinking that is frequently described as characteristic of emerging adolescents. Recent research indicates that only one-third (if that) of the eighth-grade population has reached this level. Many students will need an activity-based program (Cheatham, 1989).

Students in Chapter One programs have varied abilities and have attained a wide range of achievement levels by the time they have reached middle school. It is imperative that instructional programs focus on the natural development of reading and writing and the students' needs. Cheatham (1989) refers to the middle school burnout that results when students are constantly bombarded with material that is too difficult and is not meaningful. Middle-level students must be allowed time to explore meaning through the writing process (Brazee, 1983). Composing meaning is rarely an orderly procedure and follows no set formula.

Several instructional development features can be included in a Chapter One program for middle school students. A workshop type atmosphere in the classroom will help accommodate the social, physical, and intellectual needs of middle school students and will give them opportunities to explore their reading and writing. Adolescents need more independent activity, more say in what happens in the classroom, and more responsibility for their own learning. Educators need to emphasize broadening and not accelerating the curriculum for this age (Atwell, 1987).

Providing a Rich Learning Environment

When the school provides what real writers and readers need, reading and writing are demonstrated as meaning-seeking

processes. Children must be immersed in literacy by surrounding them with an abundant supply of good literature and the proper writing materials for reading, writing, and oral language. There must be continuous opportunities to read and write meaningful text and not just short sentences and isolated words. Plenty of paper and materials are needed on which to draw and scribble language and thoughts (Graves, 1983).

A study by Gates (1991) presents a picture of the remedial reading student as being on the outside looking in. Students find it difficult to move into an environment; when they do, it is only momentarily before they are on the outside looking in again. In other words, they do not live the literature. By immersion in literature and language activities, this passiveness of the low-achieving student can be changed to active participation in the literacy experience.

The instructional program should determine the arrangement of the classroom. The room should be as aesthetically pleasing and comfortable as existing conditions permit. Library books, paperbacks, encyclopedias, atlases, brochures, magazines, pictures, posters, textbooks, newspapers, and the students' own writings need to be readily accessible. A large percent of the Chapter One budget should be spent for reading materials representing a wide range of reading levels. Writing supplies should include writing utensils, paper, scissors, tape, a

stapler, paper clips, correcting fluid and manila folders. Since most Chapter One classrooms include a computer, this item can be readily incorporated into the program by using word processing programs instead of isolated skills disks. Bulletin boards can be used as message boards for informal writing exchanges between students and between the teacher and students (Atwell, 1987).

When selecting materials, works from the different genres need to be chosen. The reading and writing program should be as diverse as possible in offerings of models of different kinds of writing.

In surrounding children with literature, Graves (1983) advises teachers to act as facilitators of learning, not instructors of content. By drawing on their own enthusiasm for children and interests in reading, they can greatly enrich the program.

Nurturing Ownership of Language Experiences

Children cannot interact with their topic in a meaningful way if they are not allowed to choose it. It has been previously discussed how easy it is in a Chapter One classroom for teachers, though well meaning, to assist too much and not to wait for students' ideas. Teachers are often so eager for the students to understand a text that they steal all the mystery by interpreting its meaning. The teacher can help fuel

and brainstorm interest in writing, but the voice of the student must be present. It is the voice that pushes the child forward and gives power to the writing. No assigned topics, lead sentences, or opening paragraphs are necessary when ownership is present (Graves, 1983).

When students identify with the act of writing, they can write with emotion. An intensity can be sensed that is not present when ownership is absent. The teacher does not need to motivate when students are in control of their reading and writing (Atwell, 1987).

Providing Time to Engage in the Processes

Blocks of time must be provided for children to engage freely in the language processes without having their progress thwarted by interruptions. It is an acknowledged fact that the allowance of adequate blocks of time is a crucial problem in most Chapter One programs (Le Tendre, 1991). Atwell (1987) suggests the use of teacher mini-lessons, approximately 10 minutes in length, as a way of better utilizing classroom time. Then more time is available for engaging in the language processes. They are directly related to the students' reading and writing activities since these activities are the source of many mini-lessons. In the mini-lessons, the teacher can present strategies for enhancing reading and writing abilities. Topics that have surfaced in children's involvement in reading and

writing processes and also in conferences can be addressed. These lessons can replace isolated skills instruction and worksheets.

Modeling Involvement in the Language Processes

The modeling of reading and writing is crucial, especially in the middle school, for early adolescents are becoming more discriminating. It is important that they perceive the teacher as someone who genuinely likes to read and write. If the teacher has characteristics in the modeling process they admire, the modeling process will be more likely to be effective (Walker, 1991).

Students should see the teacher engaging in the many functions of reading and writing and hear literature read aloud to them. In respect to writing, the aspects of this recursive process need to be demonstrated--selecting a topic, drafting, redrafting, revising, and publishing (Graves, 1983).

Conferencing with Students

The small number of students in Chapter One classes is an advantage for both the teacher and students when conferencing. The time spent need not be long, often one or two minutes is sufficient, and only one or two concerns at a time should be addressed. Graves (1983) says conferences are shorter when children are in control of their own pieces and when children ask the questions. He says to let the child talk first and

ask the teacher the question; the teacher's job is to shut up, listen, and learn.

Not all writing and reading must be shared but it is necessary for some of it to be shared by the students and teacher. Conferencing should take place throughout the reading and writing processes and not just when the product is finished. Dialogue journals can be used as well as oral conferences. Problems can be shared, changes and topics considered, and discussions about the processes themselves will be included in the conferencing.

Evaluating the Language Processes Through Descriptive Techniques

The effectiveness of an integrated reading and writing program can not be assessed through traditional methods. Graves (1983) suggests choosing recording techniques for evaluation purposes according to the needs of the teacher and students. Disillusionment will set in if all the types of recording techniques are tried at once or continuously. After all, one of the advantages of a holistic program is that the teacher and students can interact without the teacher being burdened with paperwork. It might be best to start with portfolios and simple checklists and then move to anecdotal records and journals.

Goodman (1986) has emphasized the value of being a good kid-watcher. Then good record-keeping is important. All kinds

of evidence should be collected from children's involvement in the writing process: student logs and teacher journals, notes during conferences, and checklists. This collection provides a wealth of information when helping children engage in self-evaluation, compiling required reports, and conferencing with parents.

A change from a totally skills-oriented curriculum to an integrated writing and reading program involves risk-taking. It is important to explain to parents and administrators at the onset about the rationale of the program and keep them informed on a regular basis. Unless parents and administrators understand that the processes and not the product are being emphasized, there will be misunderstandings about misspellings and other mechanics of writing. Parents and administrators can be invited to share students' progress at various stages.

Summary

This paper has reviewed the professional literature concerning the natural relationship between the reading-writing processes and the role of the teacher in supporting both processes. Although the integration of reading and writing has received much attention in the last two decades, it has not always been apparent that there is a close connection in terms of implementation into school programs. The implications for

the integration of writing into a Chapter One reading program have been discussed.

This paper is not intended to be a criticism of the federally-funded Chapter One program. Instead, by integrating writing into a reading program we can better serve the needs of seventh and eighth grade students.

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