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Supporting the comprehension-composition connection in a Chapter I reading program

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the process of writing can foster children's reading abilities. From the review of professional literature on the composition-comprehension connection, the writer will develop a writing component for a Chapter I reading program.

Supporting the Comprehension-Composition
Connection in a Chapter I Reading Program

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"Writing permits children to experiment with and to organize or consolidate their literacy knowledge. Writing can provide an important vantage from which to develop insights about written language" (Shanahan, 1988, p. 638). When writers read, they use insights they have acquired when they compose. They can read between the lines and question the print because they write reading. Teachers want their children to write because everything they read is writing. When children write about topics of their own choice, read daily from books they want to read, and share both with their classmates, they will be able to give more meaningful accounts of what they have read (Hanson, 1987).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the process of writing can foster children's reading abilities. From the review of professional literature on the composition-comprehension connection, the writer will develop a writing component for a Chapter I reading program.

In Chapter I reading programs, teachers need to help students in their struggle to make meaning out of print. Chapter I students are behind their classmates at least a year in reading achievement. Usually they have a sense of failure, and their self-esteem is at low ebb. These children are developing a dislike for reading and school, in general, and each school day is getting more difficult to face.

Many students in a Chapter I program spend their primary years focusing on reading skills. As a result, they are able to apply many skill rules, but they are not readers. They are unaware of the functions of language.

Help for these students can come from an instructional program which emphasizes the reading and writing connection. Through writing they can learn that reading makes sense. Comprehension abilities can be learned through their involvement in the writing process and interacting with their teacher and peers concerning language experiences. Then children can begin to have a sense of ownership for their writing and reading. Self-esteem can improve as they learn they have something worthwhile to share, can share it successfully in writing, and, as a result, are more successful in understanding what they read.

READING-WRITING CONNECTION

A major trend in school programs is the integration of reading and writing instruction for improving reading achievement. Writing becomes the foundation of reading, because it is the most basic way for children to learn about reading. Children need to think of reading as writing (Hanson, 1987). Through writing, children learn about the written language system. Children establish a connection between reading and writing (Dyson, 1982).

On the other hand, the best way to learn about writing is to read the writing of others. We learn to write from what we

read, without being aware of what is being learned. Children must read like a writer, in order to learn how to write like a writer (Smith, 1981).

Writing, as with all language aspects, is a discovery process: It creates meaning by ordering the thoughts of the writer. Composition is creating meaning just as much as reading is creating meaning (Harms, class notes). Thinking is extended in the act of writing. Writing is like having a conversation with another person (self) (Smith, 1983).

Children, when writing, spend a lot of time reading. They read to enjoy what they have written, to keep their train of thought, to evaluate their own work, and to edit their work, and to share their writing with an audience. As children write, they learn how reading is made (Calkins, 1983).

Children as they write learn tasks that are thought of as reading abilities, for example, sequence of ideas and main idea and supporting details (Calkins, 1983). As thinking, reading, and writing abilities develop together, so the mechanical knowledges, such as handwriting, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, will develop also. Therefore, less time needs to be spent on instruction related to the fragments of language as presented in workbooks and ditto sheets, so language abilities can develop naturally through involvement with whole language experiences (Goodman, 1986; Graves, 1983).

It seems only natural that reading and writing should be taught together since one instructs the other. When children write they discover how authors think. When they receive instruction in comprehension, their reading and writing abilities are extended because of the common tasks involved in both processes (Boirsky, 1983). The Goodmans affirm this position: Children not only learn to read by reading and write by writing, but learn to read by writing and to write by reading (Goodman & Goodman, 1987).

Proficient readers regardless of whether they are reading or writing, engage in processes that enable them to derive meaning from written language. Both the reading and writing processes involve a movement between language and thought. Reading and writing bring prior knowledge into the process of creating meaning. Readers need to be aware of the writer's purpose, and writers must keep their purpose in writing for the audience in mind. When reading, readers predict what they are going to read, then they read the texts, and accept or reject the prediction. When writing, writers do much the same, they predict what they are going to say and what will come next in the draft. They try out what they will say and accept or reject according to the audience we have in mind (Boirsky, 1983).

FACILITATING THE WRITING PROCESS

Teachers should make reading a natural activity, one that is initiated by the child for that child's own purposes. "Children will read stories, poems, and letters differently when they see these texts as things they themselves could produce" (Smith, 1983b, p. 565).

Children develop a sense of story structure when they have books read aloud to them. Good quality literature should be made available to children to enhance ideas and provide a model for writing. Teachers need to surround children with literature, their own and that written by professional authors, with each given respect (Graves, 1983). They will read differently because they are writers (Calkins, 1983).

When children are makers of reading, they gain a sense of ownership over their reading (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983). Language development will occur if the participants have a personal investment in the process (Goodman, 1983; Graves, 1983c). Therefore, it is important that children write about subjects with which they are familiar (Murray, 1978). Calkins suggests that children's background of experiences should be more closely related to writing, so writing experiences should begin with personal narrative (Calkins, 1983).

When children choose their own topics, they become more invested in the writing (Calkins, 1983). When children choose a

topic that is right for them, they can control their topic and establish ownership and pride in the piece. If the topic is real and important to them they will care more about getting it down on paper. Teachers should listen and comment and be available for support and help, but the final choice should be up to the child. When children believe they have nothing of worth to write, they need to be guided to recognize what they know and build on it (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983c; Hanson, 1987).

Teachers should learn as much as possible about their students' interests. Teachers need to know the students' motivations and why they write what they do. Teachers will find that students can teach them about topics if they learn to listen to the child (Graves, 1983).

Teachers should create a learning environment that is predictable, one in which children feel comfortable in taking risks as suggested in Maslow's study as cited in Gibson & Chandler, 1988. Children need to know that work will be received and appreciated and that the teacher will show interest in the content. They need to feel free to question and to offer their solutions to problems (Graves, 1983a). Children should be allowed to make errors in order to make discoveries. They will write more if teachers accept and appreciate what they write (Clay, 1982; Graves, 1983; Goodman, 1986).

Teachers can serve as models of writers in using the writing process to create meanings that are interesting, possible, and worthwhile and in using the writing strategies that allow for ease and clarity in expression (Smith, 1983). "The teacher does not use modeling to beat the child over the head with a new skill. Rather, the teacher uses modeling to confirm the commonality of all writers, as well as to confirm new approaches by the child in the writing process" (Graves, 1983, p. 215). "Writing is for ideas, action, reflection, and experience. It is not for having your ignorance exposed, your sensitivity destroyed, or your ability assessed" (Smith, 1983b, p. 562). Graves states that "A specific teacher response to writing, the provision for publishing, and the response of other children (when response helps) gradually convince writers they have something worthwhile to say (1983, p. 215).

Teachers should write with their students. When teachers share their writing, students begin to realize that adults have the same problems they do and that teachers also may need to ask for help from the audience of students (Bissex, 1981). Students need to realize that the process of writing is also important for teachers to engage in. Teachers need to model for their students the entire process of writing, sometimes speaking aloud what they are thinking as they write. While writing with their students, teachers are more able to understand and to help with

children's writing problems throughout the different writing stages. Teachers learn, through writing themselves, that writing is not easy, that it takes time, and that teachers and students can help one another become better writers (Graves, 1983).

Teachers need to observe their students in the writing process and to help them develop effective writing strategies as they move back and forth among the different aspects of the writing process--prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing. Writing is not a step by step process, but recursive (Calkins, 1986).

Children need to develop a sense of audience. Without this sense of audience, writers communicate only with themselves. The consideration of others while writing does not mean that children should write only for the teacher (Kroll, 1978). Teachers can encourage children to consider audiences through an interactive classroom in which children write for each other and respond to each other's compositions (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983; Kroll, 1978). "Powerful learning occurs when children experience the failure or success of their words to communicate to peers" (Kroll, 1978, p. 831). Sharing with audiences causes children to become concerned about the exactness of their writing; they care more about their writing if they know it communicates with an audience. Through publishing and sharing the finished product, authors receive praise and encouragement, and as a result, their self-esteem improves (Graves, 1983a).

When children get beyond first and second grades, they become more self-conscious about sharing their writing with an audience. They begin to feel peer pressure and to develop a fear of being different from their peers. At this time, students need to come to terms with the responses of others. Teachers can offer a safe and supportive environment with rules and controls to prevent writers from fearing the responses of their peer audience. Teachers need to listen to what children know and to help them to feel confident and willing to share their work with peers (Calkins, 1983, 1986).

"The writing process approach to teaching writing is also called the conference approach to writing. Writing is not a solitary activity. Teacher-student conferences are at the heart of teaching writing; it is through conferencing that students learn to interact with their own writing" (Calkins, 1986, p. 2).

Writers need to work with others to stimulate discussion and improve their writing (Smith, 1983). Children learn by talking, and they need to talk with others as they write. They talk with their teachers in writing conferences, and in turn, the teachers serve as models, thus guiding their students. Teachers should listen, comment, and question but not take control of the manuscript away from children. Teachers find that students take more responsibility and participate more in their own learning when the teacher allows them to keep control of their learning.

Then writing becomes a thinking tool while the teacher acts as guide and participant (King, 1986). "One of the tasks of the writing teacher is to intervene--with sensitivity and a sense of timing--so as to nudge children toward new discoveries" (Calkins, 1983, p. 93).

During prewriting, writers talk, observe, or read to map out a plan of development for their pieces. Teachers, in conferences with student writers, help students focus on their topics. In this phase of the writing process, the main task of teachers is to help writers limit their topic, because they have a tendency to choose ones which are too broad (Calkins, 1986).

Teacher and peer conferences (students discussing with students) can make dramatic changes in children's writing. When the structure of teacher conferences is known, that predictability enables children to learn how to help each other as well as how to improve their own drafts. When writing conferences are guided and modeled by the teacher, students soon learn how to share their writing with one another (Bissex, 1981). Children's responses to their peers' writing often seem to be modeled after the kinds of responses made by their teacher (Calkins, 1983).

Even when peers make no comments, it is helpful to the writer to have a listener, for it is important for the writer to read the piece aloud. Then the writer will find ways to make the text clear to the audience (Hanson, 1987).

In writing, ideas and concepts are more important than correct mechanics such as spelling and punctuation. Teachers should focus on the content of students' writing and wait until the final draft is completed to collaborate with them in clarifying meaning through mechanics (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983; Hanson, 1987). Teachers should not try to teach more than two skills during a single conference. Skills are learned more readily within the context of children's writing rather than through isolated drills in workbooks (Graves, 1983).

The teaching of mechanics must be centered on helping children solve problems for themselves. In this case, the child depends on the teacher for focus when it is needed. Teachers need to give help with information, and then the child will soon take control of the mechanical conventions (Graves, 1982).

WRITING EXPERIENCES TO FOSTER CHILDREN'S READING ABILITIES

Children's opportunities to create meaning through language was extended through writing in a Chapter I reading program for one group of students, ages nine to twelve. The writer introduced a writing workshop, a small group of peers supported by the teacher in the writing process and in interacting with each other's compositions. In presenting the workshop concept, the teacher shared stories of her own experiences about family and pets that reflected her life. Then she encouraged the children to share orally about themselves, which led the students to

realize that they had something worthy to share that would be interesting to others in the group. As they shared ideas, the teacher offered support to encourage them to be comfortable with their peers and the teacher as audiences.

To facilitate the organization of the writing experience, the students were given, along with the teacher, writing folders. They wrote on the inside of the front cover a list of at least four topics related to their personal experiences that they could use in writing personal narrations. After selecting a topic, the children and teacher began writing, focusing their attention on their ideas rather than on writing mechanics. These mechanical problems could be taken care of at a later time. Because Chapter I periods of time are short, the teacher and students continued to draft again the next day.

The students and the teacher briefly shared their topic choice before continuing to write the next class period. They discussed what to do if they got "stuck" in the process of writing their story. They decided that they would quietly discuss the problem with the teacher or one of their peers. At the end of the second class period, one child shared his draft. The teacher modeled how to respond to others' compositions by telling the writer what part of the story the teacher liked best, by asking the writer to reread the story again, asking questions about parts that were not clear, and by encouraging the other students

to tell what part of the story they liked best. The teacher concluded this second period with the promise that the other students could share their unfinished stories the next day, before the writing began.

During each sharing session, the teacher guided the students to receive a peer's story in a considerate and constructive way. The children liked sharing in the small group, feeling important as the center of attention and beginning to realize that they did have something important to say and did enjoy telling others about it. As a result, the children saw that their ideas were valued, and they valued themselves more.

The teacher continued modeling and guiding the students in the writing process for about three weeks by taking part in the small group discussion and individual conferences with students. When the children began to hold child to child conferences, the teacher found their responses to be similar to responses modeled by the teacher.

As the children began to finish their first drafts, they made appointments to share those drafts with their group. Again the teacher modeled receiving the draft. The teacher shared her own finished draft, to which the children commented, questioned, and made suggestions. The teacher modeled making changes in the first draft, helped the students to see that it is all right to mess up their paper while in the revising aspect of the

composition process. She demonstrated crossing out, making arrows, and inserting ideas, all a part of finding a system of revision that would work for them.

Also, the teacher showed that the writer owns his/her composition experience and therefore selects the suggestions to incorporate into the revision. Children sometimes chose to continue the revision of the piece of writing. They read and reread to improve the clarity of the piece.

The teacher showed them how to cut the piece apart and to tape or glue the pieces in the correct order, when they appealed for help with the sequence of their story. The children found revision fun and easy when they used the computer. They could easily delete portions of a piece, move or replace segments of the text, and add to the text at any given place.

After the content of the stories were developed, children examined the mechanical aspects of their compositions such as spelling, sentence construction, and punctuation. To help them become aware of mechanics, the teacher conducted lessons that encouraged the students to examine their own compositions, for example, proofreading and circling words they thought were misspelled or checking the use of punctuation in order to strengthen the meaning of the story. Only one skill was taught at a time, and improvements over earlier drafts were noted. When

an error in mechanics was made on more than one paper, the teacher taught a skills lesson to those children.

The activity in the writer's workshop encouraged the students to listen carefully because they had to make comments and ask questions about the stories read aloud. Also they read their own drafts again and again to be certain that the piece would make sense to their peers. The audience for the children's compositions was extended because they wrote for their peers as well as the teacher. The teacher participated in the sharing session as another member of the workshop group, trying not to control the session.

All of the children's work was kept in their writing folders. They were instructed to throw nothing away as they might want to return to it later. Writing was always in progress and never completed.

The teacher held brief individual conferences with each student at least once a week. The teacher encouraged the children to read their pieces aloud, and they would often discover their own problems and solve them with little or no help from the teacher. The teacher made comments and asked questions if she thought it would extend the content of the story. Frequently the children would indicate that a conference was needed; they enjoyed conferencing.

After writing daily for three weeks, writing was scheduled for three days a week to make time for other reading activities. In developing reading and writing abilities, children need to read books of their choice and to hear stories read aloud, then discussing these experiences. The teacher continued the same workshop procedure as children interacted with the writing of professional authors. The teacher and children received this writing in the same way they received their own writing by commenting, questioning, and trying to understand the author's intentions.

When the children had three or four writing pieces in their folder, the teacher suggested that they choose a piece for publication that would extend their sense of audience. Their favorite means of publication was a hard cover book that they made themselves in which they housed their story along with a title page as a commercially-published book. The children placed a library card in the book, and it could be checked out of the classroom library. Children sometimes chose a variation of the regular type of book, such as a book with accordion-type pages, split pages, or a pop-up feature. They did art work for the end papers and provided illustrations for the text. Sometimes stories were typed by the teacher and displayed on the bulletin board. A student occasionally gave a copy of his/her story to

each member of the group. Stories written by members of the workshop group were also bound into collections.

The teacher found that although children often preferred personal narration, they liked to try other kinds of writing. The children tried fiction writing in first person. Their favorite topics were horror stories at Halloween, Christmas surprise stories, romance, and mysteries. They liked to use names of members of the group to delight those peers when the story was shared with the group. Sometimes the fiction stories were patterned after television programs, but more often after books they had read.

Students created texts for wordless picture books. They liked to pick a partner and together add the story to a book without text.

The children's sense of story was extended through picture books with predictable patterns. The teacher offered this literature experience as a springboard for story writing. The students wrote stories, for example, about their own bad days after the teacher shared Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day, by Judith Viorst. One child wrote a clever story about overdressing for a boy-girl party and her solution to the problem, after reading Dandelion, by Don Freeman. A child who liked Beverly Cleary's Ramona wrote chapter after chapter of experiences she created with Ramona as the central character.

The teacher read aloud much quality poetry to the children at appropriate moments. Children memorized some of the favorites through reading and reciting repetition in class, did choral readings, and practiced individual poems to share with the group. For example, when choral readings were done of "The Witches Song" from Lillian Moore's book Something new begins at Halloween, the poem was soon memorized. Children wanted to return often to the poem "Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening," by Robert Frost and would join the teacher in reciting it. In the spring, they memorized the poem "Go Wind," by Lillian Moore from her book Something new begins.

Together the children and their teacher studied different forms of poetry. They read examples of different forms, and then experimented with their own poetry individually and as a group. Some of the children chose to write several kinds of poems and chose some of the best to publish as a class in a hard cover book. Some of the forms included were acrostic, limericks, haiku, cinquain, diamante, and concrete poetry.

A picture file was another source of ideas for children's writing. As they looked through the pictures, they sometimes found that a picture reminded them of a personal experience or a fiction story they wished to tell. The teacher wrote questions on the back of the pictures to serve as collaborative ideas.

Other strategies were presented for finding a topic. The teacher suggested to the children that they could begin writing anything that would come into their mind. A worthwhile topic would often emerge. The teacher sometimes suggested a very broad topic such as medicine, pets, or sports. Then the children and the teacher made a list of words and phrases that popped into their minds as they thought about that topic. When the brainstorming list was completed, it was unusual to find a student who was not able to begin writing with a related but more narrow topic.

Authors and their works were studied. A bulletin board focusing on each author was presented with a biographical sketch prepared by the teacher and drawings of favorite incidents and characters developed by students. Also the authors' works were presented in a reading center.

Daily journal writing was a worthwhile activity. The students could write about books they had read, a certain subject that interested them, or their activities, thoughts, and feelings.

CONCLUSION

Process writing can foster children's reading abilities. In this Chapter I reading program, children learned to think of reading, as writing and reading taught together. Instruction in one led to understanding in the other process. Children learned to make sense of writing and gained a sense of ownership over

their writing as they learned that it is something they could produce that had meaning to them.

Teachers need to create a safe and predictable learning environment, support children in feeling that they are accepted and appreciated, and serve as a model of reading and writing. Teachers need to guide and model conferences so students learn how to share, help, and question one another. They need to encourage children to consider audience as an interactive environment. Teachers should be available to help when it is needed by students, but they should try not to take the control of the writing process away from the child. Teachers need to write and talk with students about their involvement in the process. By allowing children to own their writing experience, teachers see growth in reading and writing and also in enthusiasm and self-esteem: These are positive endorsements of the composition-comprehension connection.

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