

"I LOVE WRITING!"

Restructuring Writer's Workshop

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After reading Donald Graves' book A Fresh Look at Writing and Joanne Hindley's book In the Company of Children during the 1999-2000 school year, I decided that I needed to make my writer's workshop more interesting, inviting, and "child-friendly." Over the summer, I read some additional books about writing and began planning how I could restructure writer's workshop in my K-1 classroom. (See attached list). I fashioned an "ideal schedule" for a 55-60 minute block of time for writing and created a list of possible mini-lessons that I could/would give when the children's work or questions told me they were ready.

I still wasn't sure what my actual research question was at the beginning of the school year. All I knew was that I wanted to restructure writer's workshop by synthesizing what the writing experts had to say on the subject. I started out the school year with brand new "Reading/Writing Boxes" for the children; these boxes were far more accessible than my previous methods of organizing writing materials. From the second day of school, I began giving and recording mini-lessons. Children felt empowered from the start, because the first two mini-lessons were on how to access and store materials in the Reading/Writing Boxes and how to engage in Whole Brain Writing (handout enclosed in this packet). The Kings Park Teachers As Readers group read Carl Anderson's how's it going? and this caused me to add another dimension to my restructuring—effective conferencing with children about their writing. I took field notes about what I noticed as children wrote, conferenced with me, and shared their writing with their classmates.

Each weekend, I would look over my field notes and analyze children's products. I recorded my thoughts, delights, puzzlements, aggravations, etc. in a reflective journal. When I finally met with a support group in December, I still had not articulated a research question. However, during the process of explaining my research to the group, I realized that at least eight factors (see handout enclosed) were working to bring about a positive change in my writer's workshop. Some of these influences, such as the mini-lessons and conferring, were the result of deliberate actions on my part. Some of the influences had simply "emerged" due to the dynamics of the classroom. With the group facilitator's help, I organized a spreadsheet to track the influence of these factors on children's writing. The spreadsheet data told me which of the changes were having the

most effect on children's writing. It also told me which children were most affected by the changes and which children were least affected. Best of all, talking to the group helped me formulate a research question: "What happens to children's writing when I restructure my writer's workshop?"

With this question in mind, I continued to conduct mini-lessons as needed, hold periodic writer's celebrations, conference frequently with children, track the influences, and reflect weekly on what I noticed. When I reread my reflections, I could see just how much the children, especially certain children, had progressed since the beginning of the school year. I could also see what worked and what didn't work. Emphasizing quality over quantity was definitely successful. Having children reread their Writer's Notebooks and pull out "story seeds" for quarterly Writer's Celebrations was phenomenally successful. Keeping a record of the mini-lessons I delivered helped me stay organized and reminded me what I could reasonably expect from the children. Focusing on the process of writing more so than the end products helped children see themselves as writers. All year long, we've emphasized the creative nature of writing, leaving the mechanics to be taught/learned via the mini-lessons. More than one child spontaneously exclaimed to me, "I love writing!" I even administered a survey (handout enclosed) to quantify how many of my students actually did like writing. 18 out of 24 indicated they liked writing, only one said she did not like writing, and the rest said they liked writing sometimes.

As I continued to read what the experts had to say about writing, I continued to refine my mini-lessons and my expectations regarding children's writing. Instead of focusing solely on story-writing, I shifted to lists, letters, and how-to writing. The children were very successful and became even more confident about their writing. On those occasions when I had another adult in the classroom during writer's workshop, the writing process always went very smoothly. Even when I had no adult help, I asked the children to help each other, and they gradually became more consistent and capable of doing so.

Mem Fox says that, to write well, one must "ache with caring" about the message one is trying to communicate. I tried to keep that in mind as I encouraged my students to "live their lives as writers" (Calkins). I wanted them to notice what was going on around them and record it in their notebooks. I constantly modeled writing, and many of them began to emulate me.

At mid-year, the students were way ahead of where my K-1 students had been last year in relation to the literacy scale. I believe this is because I've paid closer attention to children's writing and I'm striving to be more effective at scaffolding it. This is not to say that everything has gone perfectly. I am still working on refining my conferring skills. I still have some students who aren't motivated to write or are not writing "up to their potential." Some students are still focused on product rather than process and rush through, rather than savoring, their writing. However, I do believe that the eight influences I was able to identify have had a definite positive impact on children's writing.

The strongest three influences have been structured mini-lessons, competent conferring, and the Writer's Celebration.

Using the Writer's Notebook as a place to practice and refine one's writing has given the children the time and ownership that the experts say are essential to the development of young writers. Inviting children to share their discoveries and successes at applying the mini-lessons has provided response and community, two more important elements for writing growth. Striving to "get on the child's line of thinking" (Anderson) has helped me focus on the writer, as opposed to the writing, when I confer with my students. As a result, I've been able to identify appropriate mini-lessons for individuals, groups, and the class as a whole. Finally, encouraging children to re-read their notebooks, publish stories, and share them with their classmates and the community has given children a purpose for their writing. They do, in fact, "ache with caring" about sharing their writing during our Writer's Celebrations.

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