

Special Education and at-Risk Kindergarteners as Authors

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Abstract

Special Education and at-risk kindergarteners can be outstanding authors given the appropriate educational opportunity. In a small, suburban public school district, two university professors collaboratively met with experienced special and general education teachers to introduce them to writing workshop methodology. This year-long series of monthly meetings and in-class demonstrations by the consultants supported the kindergarten educators as they taught writing to all children. The special and general education teachers shifted from an emphasis on student products to focusing on children's abilities and needs as the kindergarteners composed their pieces during writing workshop. According to the teachers, student work "far exceeded their expectations." Pictures of youngsters' compositions, samples of topics used, and some teacher developed tools are included in this article to show that writing workshop was a positive experience for all. The workshop approach motivated the children to see themselves as authors and honored everyone's attempts and accomplishments.

Special Education and at-Risk Kindergarteners as Authors

In the 1990's researchers debated whether "whole language" was a good way to teach writing to special education and remedial students (Smith-Burke, Deegan, & Jaggar 1991). Replicating emergent literacy studies, Katims (1991) found that early writing behaviors of students with special needs increased in complexity, variety, and structure when the children were exposed to numerous planned literacy activities on a daily basis. Whole language is based on constructivism where all students benefit from frequent and meaningful composing, support of self-regulated learning, and the integrative nature of literacy development.

Constructivist writing is based on each student's use of his or her prior knowledge and experience. This approach allows every student's voice to be heard. In

constructivism, special education and general education children learn from each other, as well as from the teacher. They learn by doing rather than by watching and listening (Dougiamas 1998). However, constructivism can lead to overreliance on incidental learning and little emphasis on writing mechanics. These factors can be methodological weaknesses for special needs students (Graham & Harris 1994). Yet, special education students achieve in writing process classrooms where cooperative and reciprocal learning, multisensory teaching, and respect for different learning styles are found (Elliott 1995). Even collaborative classrooms that only used weekly language-enriched program interventions showed higher scores on writing subtests that assessed the production of relevant sentences containing correct mechanics and spelling (Garber & Klein 1999).

More recently, interest in process writing has revived. Gentry (2005) indicated that writing conferences, an integral part of writing workshop, can incorporate six instructional techniques that support the writing development of emergent special needs kindergarten authors. These techniques are teaching writing in a block, teaching on the individual student's level, supporting each student's efforts, using verbalization, using concrete objects, and assessing the student's developmental spelling stage.

Some researchers, however, promote more traditional methodology to accomplish the same objectives. The Center on Accelerating Student Learning examined the impact of extra spelling and handwriting instruction, as well as explicit teaching of planning and writing strategies, to prevent writing difficulties for young struggling writers (Graham & Harris 2005). On the other hand, Zelkowitz (2009), a practitioner, promotes writers workshop in her collaborative team teaching (CT) classroom. She uses a daily brief mini-lesson and guided, interactive, peer and independent writing. She also confers with individual students during writing time and has students share their work daily.

Writing workshop is based on the writing process (pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing). Workshop contains an interactive pattern of writing activities that occur daily in the classroom. Classes include teacher directed and student centered mini-lessons and independent, buddy, and group writing. Sharing, an integral part of the process, incorporates both student chosen and teacher directed pieces in different genres and subject areas. Workshop also includes peer-to-peer and teacher-to-peer instruction and small group interaction (Calkins 1991; Fountas & Pinnell 2001; Graves 1994).

Teacher Training

"If we always do what we've always done, we will get what we've always got." – Adam Urbanski

In October of 2008, the Director of Curriculum and Instruction in a suburban school district invited two university professors to introduce the district's experienced special and general education kindergarten teachers to writing workshop. They met as an entire grade at least once a month. The consultants provided background and insight into writing workshop. The goal of this collaborative in-service was to scaffold the teaching skills of the special and regular education professionals as they supported their students in the writing process. The characteristic that distinguishes this type of instruction from other writing programs is that the products originate from the children themselves. Instruction is focused on a teaching point or objective, but the daily agenda primarily encourages students to write. Everyday writing enhances both the students' skills and their belief in themselves as authors.

The teachers' choice of components for kindergarten writing workshop included a five to ten minute mini-lesson with student sharing, followed by 20 to 25 minutes of independent writing. To focus students and keep them on task, teachers periodically reminded them of the mini-lesson's objective. A final sharing of student writing by pairs of students ended each session and reinforced the concept of all students as authors.

Teachers' Initial Feelings Upon Hearing About The Program

"It is what teachers think, what teachers do and what teachers are at the level of the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people get." – Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan

When the kindergarten teachers first heard about workshop, they were quite hesitant. The educators felt that they were being asked to add a new system of writing instruction to their existing curriculum. Originally, the self-contained special educator stated, "We already have an established, successful writing program that jells well with our language arts teaching." Additionally, the general education inclusion teachers were uneasy about specific aspects of writing workshop for special populations, particularly the idea that students produced writing with as little scaffolding from the teacher as possible. The teachers did not think that this independence would be possible. Further, the instructional focal point shifts from product to process. The teachers needed to accept the idea that whatever the students can do individually is acceptable. If one student can only draw pictures or write letters, while another can write full sentences, that is permissible. The entire class no longer attempts to try to produce the same product at the same time.

After a short while, the teachers realized that they needed to release some control over their students' writing. These educators felt that they needed to exit their comfort zone so that the students would feel like authors. The instructors came to believe that they had to adapt the way they had been teaching writing in the past and open their minds to this new approach.

Writing Workshop Implementation

“What a child can do today with assistance, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow.” –Lev Vygotsky

Many special and general educators have students in their classes who struggle with writing. The kindergarten teachers in this district developed and implemented the following tools to enable all their children to take the risks that are necessary to become successful writers. Some of the teaching tools they used are listed and illustrated below:

- 1) Student folders with alphabet and sound sheets on the front



- 2) A classroom word wall that students used



- 3) A copy of this word wall in individual writing folders



- 4) “Spacemen” or craft sticks for spacing between words



- 5) Dashes to demonstrate how many words are in a given sentence



- 6) Checklists for self editing



- 7) Sticky notes to label students' writing and illustrations



- 8) Graphic organizers



and

- 9) Physical objects



These teaching tools provided ways for instruction to be scaffolded and assisted all the special education, English language learner, and general education kindergarteners. Particularly, handling physical objects from the classroom and home motivated the students to write. The items activated the children's prior knowledge and helped them to clarify ideas. Additionally, taking walks, going on field trips, and flying a kite on the school field, for example, enabled students to experience topics about which they could write. Teachers began with concrete examples whenever possible to help the children build a substantial pool of information for writing. Webs and other graphic organizers were especially

effective in facilitating students' organization of learned or remembered information. Brainstorming was also used to generate further ideas. Partnering strong students with special needs and English Language Learners fostered good communication and helped everyone write interesting pieces. Physically donning name tags, such as, "Author John" and "Writer Mary", identified the beginning of writing workshop and motivated the students to do their best during the writing block.



A Sample Writing Unit

"It doesn't happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time." –Margery Williams

The teachers taught many units throughout the year during writing workshop. In one unit, entitled Purposeful Writing, students ultimately created their own lost posters. The teachers initiated the unit by reading *The Three Little Kittens* (Galdone 1986) and *Corduroy* (Freeman 1968). In the stories, mittens and a button are lost. The teachers and the children interactively completed lost posters for each book with the students describing the lost items. Next, the educators reviewed how to make the posters. Then the children made their own poster for a lost Corduroy.

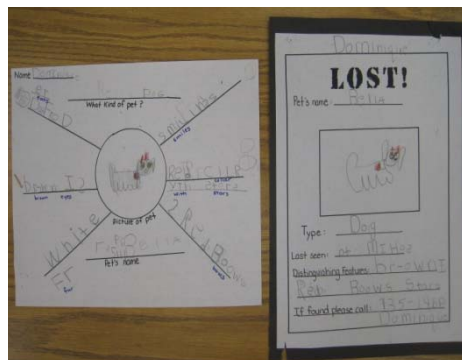


The classes then made more lost posters for things that they had actually lost, like hats and jackets. As a culminating project for this theme, the teachers asked the children to bring in a stuffed animal pet from home. The pet wore a name tag and was kept in the classroom for an entire week. When the children came into school with their toys, they received a blank web to describe the toy pet. The following

day, they used their web to make a lost poster for their stuffed pets. Teachers also took pictures of the children pretending to be sad when their pet was lost. Then they took happy pictures of them reunited with their stuffed animals with big smiles on their faces.



When the students completed their lost posters, the teachers invited another class to visit and share the products. All the pets were displayed in the front of the classroom. The students read each poster and called on their guests to find their pets. The children really enjoyed this activity and understood how writing can help them in real life. One special education child even took it a step further because he actually did lose one of his toys that he had brought to school. In his spare time, he made his own poster for his lost toy and hung it in the kindergarten hallway. Another student saw the poster, found the toy, and returned it to him. Both children were incredibly delighted by this authentic example of purposeful writing.



Another Sample Writing Project



The teachers implemented a “How To” unit during the latter part of the school year. With many examples, they emphasized how to create a piece of writing that describes doing or making something. Initially, the teachers read *Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come* (Carlson 1999). In this story, a young mouse follows clear steps to get ready for kindergarten. The students completed a chart to show the steps the mouse followed. Then they charted how they themselves had prepared for the first day of kindergarten. The students wrote on organizers that listed the key words “First”, “Then”, “Next”, “Last”. Then the youngsters repeated this activity many times describing a number of experiences, for example, how to grow a plant.



As an experiential, fun-filled activity to culminate this unit, the entire kindergarten gathered at the school field to learn how to fly a kite. With anticipation, the smiling children eagerly waited to see a teacher send a kite soaring into the sky. After this enjoyable, real life, in-house field trip, the boys and girls returned excitedly to their classrooms to chronicle their own “How to Fly a Kite” stories. Using their organizers, they planned their writing pieces using the “first,” “then” “next,” and “finally” transition words that they had learned.

“The outcome was beyond anything we could have imagined!” exclaimed a reading specialist as the consultants and the kindergarten teachers debriefed near the end of the school year. “The students are confident, happy writers, producing pieces of writing that not only meet, but exceed, our expectations,” echoed a general education teacher.



Writing workshop was an exciting and positive experience for the special education, English Language Learner, and general education kindergarteners, as well as for their teachers. The simple goal of this professional development was to enhance the educators’ skills in teaching writing and to make children better writers. “When we first began this program we were hesitant to add a new way of writing to our existing curriculum,” said the reading specialist. “There were also specific aspects to this writing program that made us uneasy. For instance, there is a large focus on writing that is rather independently produced by students.”

The teachers learned that they could give input and guidance without detracting from the students’ voices. The instructors’ focal point shifted from product oriented to process oriented. “We needed to get used to the idea that whatever the students could do individually was acceptable,” stated the special education teacher. “If one student could only write letters, while another could write full sentences, it was ok. The entire inclusion and self-contained classes could complete the same assignment to the best of students’ abilities at their own pace.”

A general educator said, “As teachers, we needed to let go and stop directing our students’ writing so closely. We needed to change our comfort zones for the benefit of the children. We had to let go of the way we had taught writing in the past and learn to accept this different style of teaching.”

Another teacher summed up the feelings of the group. “The students’ writing was so much better than what children used to do. They eagerly participated during workshop time and were thrilled to share their writing with their writing partners. By the end of the year, all our students felt like authors.”

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