

Using Children's Literature to Help Fifth Grade Students Attain Their Writing Goals

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- Context

As an intern in the Pennsylvania State University's Professional Development School I have spent an entire year in a fifth grade classroom in Ferguson Township Elementary School. Ferguson Township Elementary is a small county school with a total of 323 students. Parents and community members are involved in many school activities, creating a family-oriented environment. The class is comprised of nineteen students, nine boys and ten girls. Each student in the class has varying academic, behavioral, and social needs. The class may seem ethnically homogeneous, as seventeen of the nineteen students are Caucasian (one student is Indian and one student is Chinese); however, many of the students differ in economic status and cultural background. For instance, many of the students have traveled to or lived in different countries, such as Germany and Egypt.

Academically, students in this class show a wide range of abilities. Some students work above grade level and receive learning enrichment. For example, two students are enrolled in a middle school level math class and two students participate in a reading enrichment book club with the school librarian. A few other students work below grade level and receive additional support. Two students receive reading instruction through a learning support teacher. One of these students also attends learning support math classes. A paraprofessional works with these two students when they are in our classroom for social studies, science, writing, and technology lessons.

- Rationale

This inquiry focuses on the individual needs students have pertaining to writing. Many of the writing pieces completed in my classroom are scored using the Pennsylvania

System of School Assessment (PSSA) Writing Scoring Guideline. This guideline indicates five main areas of evaluation for fifth grade writing: focus, language, organization, style, and conventions. Students receive a score (1-4) in each area of evaluation, which are combined to create a holistic score for the piece.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has noted that writing is “one of the most important skills that young people can acquire and develop throughout their lives.” Because I agree with this statement and believe that clear writing comes from clear thinking, I have a genuine interest in helping my students become strong, clear writers. Early on in my internship I was amazed at how well my mentor knew what each child needed to work on to improve. Each student was at a different place on a learning continuum, especially in writing.

Inspired by my mentor’s ability to help each child work on exactly what he/she needed to improve upon, I began to wonder how I could manage writing time in a manner that would allow each student to concentrate on a particular area.

- Wonderings

Main Question: How can children’s literature be used to inspire fifth grade students to make progress on their differentiated writing needs?

Sub-Questions:

--How can growth in writing be measured?

--What qualities do fifth graders believe “good” writing has?

-- How does concentrating on one writing trait affect a student's ability to use other writing traits?

--How can I help students to articulate and understand the abstract idea of style?

- Data Collection and Analysis

The first step in my data collection process was to administer a classroom survey. I surveyed the entire class to better understand their likes, dislikes, comforts, and discomforts in regard to writing. Once I received the student survey responses, I looked at each question and used a tally system to find the most prominent or reoccurring responses in order to find if there were general trends among my fifth grade students in relation to writing.

I wanted to provide students with an additional opportunity to analyze their own writing and articulate the areas in which they were seeking to make improvements. In order to do this, students were given time look through their individual writing portfolios and examine pieces that they had written early in the school year and the scores that they had received. This rubric scored student writing in five categories descriptive language, organization, style, focus, and conventions. As students revisited their pieces they found areas in which they wanted to improve based on the score or written feedback. Then, I asked students to write a letter that explained their three writing goals as well as which goal was the most important and why it was his or her top priority.

By combining the information from each student's survey response and each student's goal letter I created an index card for each student that stated what areas of writing they found to be difficult and the areas of writing that they wanted to make

improvement. I was then able to sort these index cards into groups of students based on their needs. I was aware that this process required students to have a strong metacognition of their own writing needs; however, I felt that each student's goals aligned with my beliefs of what each child needed to work on.

Once I had placed students into groups based on four writing traits (descriptive language, organization, style, and focus) I was ready to help each child make growth in the area in which they were concentrating on. After figuring out how to logistically manage our schedule, I was able to meet briefly with each group. I held a separate discussion with each of the four writing trait groups (descriptive language, organization, style, and focus) about what they thought their writing trait was and why it was important to include in their writing. I was apprehensive about accurately articulating what style is with that particular group, so I brought what I considered to be strong examples of different styles of writing. Once I had these discussions with my students I gave them a prompt that correlated well to each group's particular writing trait. For example, I asked the descriptive language group to describe their favorite place while appealing to the five senses. Students had one week to complete the writing prompt and they knew that they would be scored solely on the writing trait that they were concentrating on.

After reading the completed student pieces, my next step was to meet with the groups again and explain that I felt as though I did not do my job in helping them to make progress in the writing trait that they were concentrating on. As I was reading the student pieces it was clear that I had not done my job to scaffold the students in a way that would help them to be successful on this assignment. I read numerous descriptive language pieces that stated, for example, in my room I hear my sisters talking. I feel happy because

I am in my room. I taste nothing. Feeling a little discouraged, I wrote my own example piece that I felt illustrated all four traits, hoping that with a specific example to emulate students would be able to make progress. As I read these pieces I felt that the students were starting to see what these four traits were all about; however, I still wasn't satisfied that I was providing them with the best writing instruction possible.

To rid myself of this dissatisfaction I decided it was time to try a new intervention—children's literature. I was almost dumbfounded that I had not thought of it sooner. The link between strong readers and strong writers is apparent. Lucy Calkins writes about the connection between reading and writing in her book, *The Art of Teaching Writing*. She explains, "If one text can be used as an exemplar of many qualities of good writing, we can take the time to read it together for all the wondrous ways in which it affects us, and only then return to it in order to examine the ways in which it embodies particular qualities of writing." When I looked back at the goal letters my students has written, I noticed that they, too, saw a clear relationship between reading and writing, which is provided by the following excerpts from students' goal letters. One student stated that, "...my second goal is to add style to my writing. I want to do that because I read books with lots of style and it pops out at me." Another student explained that, "...my words need to be stronger. When I read a book I can find a word that maybe I don't know, but it helps me to put a picture in my mind. And I really want to put a picture in my reader's head."

With this new motivation, I went to our elementary school library and selected a book that I felt encompassed all four writing traits in a clear manner. The book I chose was Chris Van Allburg's *Just A Dream*. Before introducing this new piece of literature as

a read aloud to my fifth graders, I asked them to complete a free write that answered the question, “What makes a good writer good?” I wanted to gain insight as to what they associated with good writing. I felt that if I were aware of their current ideas of what “good writers” do, it would help to more concretely determine if, in fact, Chris Van Allsburg is a “good writer.” To analyze this data I recorded each quality that my students named when defining what good writers do. I tallied the results in order to find the most common responses. This analysis method illustrated what my students valued in writing and how they constituted “good writing.”

Once we had a common understanding of what we considered to be good writing, I read the students *Just A Dream* by Chris Van Allsburg. I have a clear memory of introducing this book. I explained to the children that we were going to listen for good writing and eventually we would try to be like Van Allsburg in our own writing. I further explained this new introduction to a writing lesson by telling the students that if we had the opportunity to have Michael Phelps show us how to do the backstroke or the butterfly, we would try to swim as he swims; but for now we were going to try to write as Chris Van Allsburg writes.

After hearing the story, students completed an activity during which they acted as Chris Van Allsburg’s lawyers. Their goal was to prove that he was, in fact, a “good writer.” In order to make their case, students worked within their writing trait groups to find evidence of their particular writing trait. Once they found evidence they had to explain why it was a strong piece of evidence. To analyze this data, I highlighted key explanations that showed whether or not the students could accurately explain how the evidence was proof of their writing trait. I found the student responses so insightful that I

decided to make a poster for our classroom that illustrated where students found each trait in the text of *Just A Dream* and student quotes explaining why their evidence of each trait was sound.

Student writing pieces were the next data collection set. After becoming very familiar with *Just A Dream*, students wrote their own stories that paralleled Chris Van Allsburg's. In order to analyze the student work, I scored each writing piece on a rubric that held students accountable for inclusion of their particular writing trait. In addition, after students had written their pieces, they were given the opportunity to share their story with the class and receive feedback from their peers. This was an opportunity to collect data via video recording. To analyze this data I was able to use the program StudioCode to view segments of the video that depict students responding to their writing of their peers.

After my success with the last literature-based writing lessons I was eager to introduce another strong example of children's literature. For this week of writing instruction I chose to use *Thank You, Mr. Falker* by Patricia Polacco. Again, I collected data by having the students identify evidence of how Polacco used each writing trait well and by using a rubric to score a student writing piece that parallels the example of children's literature. However, there was one difference in this data collection phase. After students completed this writing piece, I wanted to gain evidence to help me to answer one of my sub-question—How does concentrating on one writing trait affect the student's ability to use other writing traits? To better understand this sub-question, I asked students to provide not only evidence of the writing traits that they had been concentrating on, but also any of the other writing traits.

- Explanation of Findings

Claim 1: Students in my fifth grade classroom have individual writing goals. When these writing goals are not met writing becomes a frustrating experience for fifth grade writers.

My initial survey allowed me to notice a few essential patterns among my fifth grade class. First of all, when I asked students how they felt when they receive a new weekly writing prompt an alarming number responded with words such as “frustrated,” “mad,” or “annoyed.” Some students did say that they were excited to receive a new prompt, but many specified they were only excited if they liked the topic of the prompt. After analyzing this survey I also had evidence of the variation that exists between what my fifth grade students. This evidence led me to the belief that, as a whole, my students were not viewing writing as an overly enjoyable experience.

Additional data that supports this claim was provided when students articulated their writing goals by writing me a letter. When I read each student’s goal letter, my original impression of disparity between writers in my fifth grade class was confirmed. Out of a total of 19 students, 6 were placed in the language group, 4 were placed in the style group, 4 were placed in the focus group, and 5 were placed in the organization group. These numbers show that there is not a strong majority when it comes to where fifth grade writers feel as though they need to improve their writing.

Claim 2: My fifth grade students can accurately identify what components of their writing need improvement, but without adequate instruction they are unable to make progress.

This claim is supported by evidence in initial student surveys as well as by the writing goals students set and explained in their letter to me. Through their surveys and letters, I discovered that my fifth grade students were able to identify areas that they needed to improve in; yet, many students did not have a clear idea of how they could attain their writing goal. For instance, in one letter a student wrote that “word choice I don’t do because I won’t know the word later on. Style--I don’t know what style is.”

Evidence that supports my belief that without adequate instruction students are unable to make progress is found in the first and second writing prompts students completed, before I incorporated children’s literature into our writing instruction. When comparing the quality of student writing, before and after incorporating children’s literature, it is clear to see that children’s literature positively influenced the students’ writing. Additionally, the written feedback students provided shows that the majority of the students found it helpful to include children’s literature in our writing instruction, many students also stated that they found it not only helpful, but also inspiring.

Claim 3: Once my fifth grade students identified strong language, organization, style, and focus in a work of children’s literature, they were able to transfer strong language, organization, style, and focus into their own writing.

After hearing the story *Just A Dream* as a read aloud, finding evidence of good language, organization, style, and focus with their peers, and discussing where each writing trait appeared in Van Allsburg’s writing, I was blown away by the pieces my fifth grade students wrote. Students in each writing trait group had made advancements in attaining their writing goals. The student feedback supports that they found inspiration

through the reading of Chris Van Allsburg's book. Students recognized that they had improved and accredited their improvement, much to, the inclusion of children's literature in our writing instruction. I had shown students concrete examples of each writing trait, and they were able to begin to transfer the writing traits into their own writing.

When analyzing the video I saw that students were able to not only recognize strong examples of each writing trait in an expert's writing, but they were also able to recognize it in the writing of their classmates. I also found that students were more likely to give feedback on the writing trait that they had been concentrating on improving. For instance, one student in the organization group complimented a peer on how her piece built suspense by being organized from least dramatic to most dramatic event.

Claim 4: Despite an initial concentration on one particular writing trait, my fifth grade students were able to improve in four writing traits as a result of being witness to all four writing traits through children's literature.

Once I analyzed data from the worksheet I asked students to complete after writing the *Thank You, Mr. Falker* piece, I found that the majority of my students could find evidence of more than one trait in their piece. This supports the idea that using children's literature that demonstrates each writing trait (descriptive language, organization, style, and focus) in writing instruction can help fifth grade students to improve on more than one writing trait. For instance, one student who was originally concentrating on improving his style also noted that he had included strong organization and language in his piece.

This claim is also supported by the most recent writing piece scored by my mentor teacher. After students had been given the experiences outline above, students completed a practice PSSA Writing Test. Improvement in the quality and scores of student writing was vast and the majority of students improved not only in the writing trait that they had been concentrating on, but in each writing trait.

- Reflections and Future Practice

When I reflect on the experience of conducting a teacher inquiry, I feel that it has taught me the how to turn an educational wondering into an educational belief. The process of collecting data, analyzing that data, and using evidence to support claims is an important process that I will be able to use in the future to begin to answer questions I have about teaching and learning. This experience has also taught me to expect the unexpected, and that things may develop differently than originally anticipated.

Teacher inquiry has also shown me that there are countless ways that I could continue to try and make improvements in my own teaching. I have a method to ensure that I never become complacent and a strategic plan to achieve one of my own goals as an educator, which is continual growth. Because of this drive to try and perpetually improve I feel that if I were to do this inquiry again I would do a few things differently. My original idea stemmed from the desire to differentiate writing instruction. Through this inquiry, I was able to differentiate writing instruction based on student interest and need; however, I feel as though I could further differentiate by teaching to various achievement levels in the classroom. In order to reach a greater number of achievement levels I would concentrate on one writing trait per week and vary the presentation of the

material for different achievement levels. For instance, the trait of organization could range from simple sentence structure, such as capital letters and appropriate ending punctuation, to adding more advanced transitional phrases.

Another essential lesson that I learned from this inquiry was to evade the error of my own assumptions. As a new teacher I entered the classroom with preconceived notions about my fifth grade class, one of which being that because my fifth grade students were the oldest in the building, they were able to succeed without much instruction. The realization that this statement is far from the truth not only led me to my first claim, but it also showed me the importance of modeling for my students. I originally thought that this inquiry would help my students to become better writers, but, in all actuality, it has helped me to become a better teacher.