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Developing voice: Writing with at-risk adolescents

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to examine current research on the writing process, to identify major aspects of an effective writing program, and then to design and implement a writing program for at-risk adolescents which encompasses these major aspects. It was found that the development of writing abilities involves the combination of personal style, cognitive development, involvement in the process, and writing instruction. A description of effective classroom instruction, which involves encouraging rather than pushing or pressuring students, is given. Voice, an important element in writing is explored and woven into the program. The writing aspects of topic selection, shared writing, guided writing, writing conferences, independent writing and sharing were implemented with the writing of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

Developing Voice:
Writing with At-Risk Adolescents

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to examine current research on the writing process, to identify major aspects of an effective writing program, and then to design and implement a writing program for at-risk adolescents which encompasses these major aspects. It was found that the development of writing abilities involves the combination of personal style, cognitive development, involvement in the process, and writing instruction. A description of effective classroom instruction, which involves encouraging rather than pushing or pressuring students, is given. Voice, an important element in writing is explored and woven into the program. The writing aspects of topic selection, shared writing, guided writing, writing conferences, independent writing and sharing were implemented with the writing of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

Writing is a process by which students can create meaning and learn about themselves. Children want to write; they want to write the first day they attend school (Calkins, 1994).

Teachers often ignore children's needs to show what they know. They underestimate this urge because of their lack of understanding of the writing process and children's approach to the process. Teachers should not take the control away from children and place unnecessary roadblocks in the way of their intentions. Children need to own their writing experience. Such ownership energizes students to engage in the writing process thereby strengthening their thinking and language abilities (Graves, 1983).

Teachers can nurture students' writing abilities by providing a classroom environment that offers genuine reasons for writing, or the functions of language (Atwell, 1987). Authorship does not begin in a struggle to put something into print but in living with a sense of awareness of one's experiences and the need to create order out of them. Writing does not begin with desk work but with life work. It is a process by which authors make something out of the ordinary (Calkins, 1994).

As an intermediate language arts teacher, how can I present the writing process to my at-risk students as a means of energizing them to create meaning out of their lives? How can I nurture their sense of ownership? First, I must consider the

characteristics of at-risk students and adolescents' approach to writing. Then, the aspects of a writing program that will nurture students' involvement in authentic writing experiences need to be explored.

Exploring an Effective Writing Program for Students At-Risk Characteristics of At-Risk Students

The term at-risk has a multitude of meanings, and most students are at-risk in some aspect of their learning or at some time in their lives. At-risk can be defined as those students who are doing poorly in their academic, personal, and social development (Bartusek, 1989). Usually, more than a single factor is present in their lives that threatens normal development. Some of these factors include low achievement, behavior problems, low socioeconomic status, and attendance at a school with a large number of poor students (Slavin, 1989).

Students at-risk are also the students that concerned teachers are alerted to based on observations of their responses to the learning environment, their achievement levels, and their interactions with peers and teachers and on knowledge of other factors (Allen, Michalove, Stockley, & West, 1991).

At-risk students are most likely to leave school with an inadequate level of basic skills. Studies of at-risk students show that by the time students are in third grade, it can be

predicted with fair accuracy which students will complete school and which students will drop out of school unless changes are made in their instructional environment (Slavin, 1989). Students may be at risk in one school environment and not in another (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989).

Students can be at risk socially, emotionally, and academically because of home and community factors. Frequently, at-risk students come from lower income families. The families are highly mobile, non-traditional, or single parent families. Other family risk factors are the language interaction in the home and the age and marital status of the mother (Richardson et al., 1989).

Writing and Intermediate School Students

The development of writing abilities involves the combination of personal style, cognitive development, involvement in the process, and writing instruction (Calkins, 1983). Effective classroom instruction encourages rather than pushes or pressures students.

Many early adolescent students have drawn the conclusion that they cannot write and that writing is hard. By this age, most students have the ability to read and articulate but may avoid writing or do not appear to have a need to write. Most writers do not live up to their potential in writing (Graves, 1983).

For students who are at-risk because of poor language abilities as well as other factors, a discrepancy usually exists between performance and potential. These students need to find out what writing can do for them. Such a discovery occurs over time; it is not easily remedied in the short term. Effective instructional approaches for these students are much the same as those used with all students. Graves (1994) says that involving students in the process of writing is similar for writers of low and high abilities.

Writing programs for students of all ages should focus on content rather than form. Most students in the intermediate school are proficient at marshalling coherent sentences on almost any subject, especially when speaking. They are capable intellectually of revising within the writing process: They can now move back and forth among the components analyzing their content and the form used to clarify their ideas (Graves, 1983).

An Important Element in Writing: Voice

Graves (1994) relates that the writing process has a driving force called voice. Murray (1992) notes, "Voice is the most personal quality in writing; the writer's voice reveals the writer" (p. 197). Voice is the imprint of the person on his/her writing. It is the part of the writer that pushes the writing ahead. If voice is taken away the writing collapses. As a result, there is no writing, just words following words. Voiceless

writing is addressed "to whom it may concern." Technically, voice is not a process component in the journey from choice-rehearsal to final revision. It underlies every part of the process (Graves, 1994).

According to Murray (1992), four basic elements are associated with an effective voice. From his studies, he has identified these elements:

Angle of vision. Voice begins with the way the writer views the subject. The writer's prior experience, knowledge of the subject, and attitude towards the subject affect the writer's voice.

Precision of language. A writer begins tuning the voice of the text by seeking the right word, phrase, sentence and paragraph. This fine tuning clarifies the meaning of the text.

Position of information. Voice can provide emphasis, pace, and flow for the composition. It is voice that tells the reader what is important and moves the reader through the story in a logical manner so that the full meaning of the draft becomes clear. Voice can adjust and vary the speed of the text so that it clarifies meaning and moves the reader through the text in a pleasing and compelling manner.

Music of the text. The song of the language propels and supports what is being said. Each piece of writing has a rhythm

that the reader hears. It is the challenge of the writer to hear the music in the text and to tune it so it clarifies its meaning.

In order for authors to hear their voice in a piece of writing, they have to own the piece by using their ideas, language and style. Students need to learn to accept themselves and to write in the way that is right for them. Their voice reflects their ethnic heritage, their family and neighborhood experience, and their education (Murray, 1992).

Teachers' Roles in Nurturing Voice

Teachers can greatly further students' understanding of the value of writing and their writing abilities by helping them discover their voice, or their sense of ownership. When teachers learn to attend to voice, they listen to the person in the piece and observe how that person uses the components of the writing process. Teachers need to look positively at differences in students to see what is unusual and specific in the writer's individual way of writing. By respecting that voice, teachers can teach students to respect their own voice. Students need to hear their own voice and then tune it to the components of the writing process (Murray, 1992). Graves (1994) affirms this idea: Voice is active through the entire writing process--selecting topics, drafting, reading, redrafting, reading, editing, reading and publishing.

From the first experience with writing, children will spend the rest of their life finding their voice, losing it, and finding it again. Every new experience, subject, stage of living from childhood through adolescence and on through adult life requires new voices to fit the changing person. Voices may be similar but they are not identical (Graves, 1994). Much of the success of this journey depends on their teachers.

Voice can come earlier in children's writing if they are supported in selecting their own topics and in maintaining their voices throughout the writing process. When a writer makes a good choice for a topic, the author's voice booms out. When the voice is strong, writing abilities emerge, frequently without any teacher-directed instruction. When the person is committed to the piece, his/her energy and pleasure in writing the piece emerges. Therefore, teachers should avoid assigning students their topics. By selecting one's own topics, the writer is confronted with new problems (Graves, 1994).

Teachers can also facilitate students' voices in writing by supporting the instructional program with a strong literature base. The different genres offer models of voice so children can learn how meaning is created through language. Also, studying authors of particular interest to students can extend their understanding of where they got their topics (usually from their

own experiences) and how they engage in the writing process (Harms & Lettow, 1992).

Aspects of a Writing Program in a Sixth Grade Classroom

In nurturing at-risk sixth graders' interest in writing, the conditions for enabling writing in the classroom and several aspects of an instructional program were considered. These aspects were topic selection, shared writing, guided writing, writing conferences, independent writing and sharing. These aspects were implemented with the writing of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction.

Conditions for Writing

This project focused on students learning to write for real purposes with the teacher providing support, affirmation, and listening to them as they took risks and worked toward finding their writing voice each time they wrote. Changes in the students' writing happened as they learned new trust, not new techniques. The quality of writing in this classroom grew more from the tone, values, and relationships of the classroom communities than from anything else. By surveying the students, it was recognized that despite the apathy sometimes shown they do have hobbies and interests. Circles of friends form around interests--families, sports, music, parties, camping, horses, television shows, comics and baseball cards. To lure these young

adolescents into caring about writing, they were encouraged to write about their projects, intentions, and purposes. An enormous energy source was tapped when the students' interests were the topics for writing and they were encouraged to write about these interests.

At-risk students ordinarily did not come to the teacher when they were confused. Typically, when these students with poor learning histories did not understand their work they would try to go unnoticed, or disrupt the classroom. Then, the teacher needed to learn as much as she could about the students' potential in order to help them expect more of themselves. Both the teacher and the students needed to collaborate to construct a shared vision of what the students knew and how they could set goals for their learning and then carry out these expectations. The teacher having high expectations for each student is a sign of caring. The teacher nurtured the students' goals by serving as a model when she wrote with them. By finding students' potential, a different mood was created in the classroom. All of the students wanted to be known for what they knew and to understand the conflicts associated with their emerging adolescence. Many of them cannot believe that their dreams and feelings have anything to do with school.

Writing became a part of the everyday instructional experience, for as Graves (1994) relates, it is extremely

inefficient to miss a day of writing. When writers write everyday, they begin to compose even when they are not writing. This daily writing time allowed the students to be able to move their pieces along until they accomplished what they set out to do. For this project, the teaching of reading and writing were combined into a ninety-minute language arts block which met daily. The instruction in these two processes was combined because they have many tasks in common. The instruction in one process reinforces learning in the other.

The classroom had structure that created predictability. Procedures for solving problems were established. Involvement in the writing components was modeled by the teacher in class instructional sessions, peer groups, and conferences.

Sustaining centers, permanently placed in the classroom and maintained throughout the year, were presented. They provided models of different genres, author studies, and a variety of expressive experiences with quality literature. The students could then draw upon these experiences when selecting topics and writing selections. Examples of these sustaining centers are: a listening/reading center, an author/illustrator center, a poetry center, a bookmaking center, and a retelling center.

The listening/reading center was stocked with literature works from all genres. Some commercially- and teacher-prepared cassette tapes were provided to give students opportunities to

hear the language. Student-authored works were also included in this center. The center was made visually appealing with many types of visuals, and objects both commercially-, teacher- and student-made, such as posters, filmstrips, peepshows and dioramas, models and displays, maps of story characters, and pillows and beanbag chairs to make it comfortable.

The poetry center featured collections of poems related to various units of study. For example, during black history month students read the poetry of Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Eloise Greenfield, Nikki Grimes and Lucille Clifton. Examples of different forms of poetry were available to assist the students in writing poetry.

In the author/illustrator center, different authors and illustrators were the focus. The center contained a biographical sketch and representative works to show the students how the life experiences of these authors/illustrators have influenced their work. It also allowed students to see how they engaged in the writing/illustrating process.

The bookmaking center included examples of a variety of different book styles. The directions and the materials for making these various books were included in the center.

The retelling center provided suggestions for sharing books and retelling stories. This center also included masks, articles of clothing, and props to be used for costumes; castoff materials

for puppetmaking; and pellen, markers and craypas for creating flannel board stories.

Topic Selection

One of the goals of the writing program was to help students learn how to listen to themselves. For many students, learning to listen to themselves is a new experience. Little teaching is usually done in the language arts program to show students how to do this. Many of the students did not know how to find topics in the common everyday events of their lives. They often seized on major events that surrounded them, such as a trip to a ball game, someone else's experience, or a television program or motion picture. The teacher modeled and demonstrated how to select topics from the ordinary events of their own lives and then expand them into a fictional story, an essay, or a personal narrative. Students saw the teacher do this demonstration many times, at least once a week in a short mini-lesson. The students were able to observe how she treated writing in her own life, how she engaged in the writing process, and what was important to her through the questions she asked of the world around her. How the values of writing as a craft were demonstrated had a profound effect on students' learning.

Experiences with quality pieces of literature were also presented as models of language to help students get in touch with their inner audience and write with their own voice.

Frequently, because of their cursive but complete structures, picture books were the models. Examples of quality picture books presented in mini-lessons were:

The Quilt Story, by Tony Johnston

Song and Dance Man, by Karen Ackerman

The Relatives Came, by Cynthia Rylant

Amber on the Mountain, by Tony Johnston

Yonder, by Tony Johnston

The Wing Shop, by Elvira Woodruff

Grandma's Shoes, by Libby Hathorn

An Angel for Solomon Singer, by Cynthia Rylant

Guess Who My Favorite Person Is, by Byrd Baylor

Way Home, by Libby Hathorn

I'm in Charge of Celebrations, by Byrd Baylor

Fortunately, by Remy Charlip

Linnea in Monet's Garden, by Christina Bjork

When students write everyday they do not find it as difficult to choose topics. If a student knows they will write again tomorrow, their mind can go to work pondering their writing topic. When students choose their own topics, more can be expected of their writing.

Shared Writing

One way to get students who are struggling and denying their interest in writing involved in the process is to choose a

topic that is well known and of interest to all the classmates for a group writing project. For students in this class who were unpracticed and lacking confidence in writing, writing a short draft that was supported by contributions from peers unleashed a flood of ideas. This type of writing, a collaborative teacher-student experience, is as appropriate for older as for younger students. In shared writing, the writing was a negotiated process with meaning, choices of words, and topics discussed and decided jointly by students and teacher. When the teacher wrote with her students, she showed them what writing is for. She showed them the why of writing and how to negotiate the journey from the emerging idea to final copy. This experience is an excellent way to learn to use precision of language.

Guided Writing

As the students gained confidence with writing, they were ready to move into guided writing. The teacher's role in guided writing was to guide students, respond to them, and extend their thinking in the process of composing their own text. The teacher took on the role of facilitator, helping students discover what they wanted to say and how to say it meaningfully with clarity, coherence, interest and style, form, and individual voice. The teacher was supportive rather than directive, suggestive rather than prescriptive. Ownership of the writing always remained with

the student. The teacher's role was to empower her writers to discover their own meanings.

The writing conference offered support for guided writing. The purpose of the writing conference was to help students inform the teacher about what they know--progress in writing and instructional needs so that she could help them more effectively. During conferences, students were asked to share these ideas: what the topic is about, where the topic came from, and what they will write next. An approximate profile of an effective conference shows the student speaking about eighty percent of the time and the teacher twenty percent (Graves, 1994). Each conference ended with the student then setting further goals for writing--topics, kind of writing, and elements that needed to be focused on for improvement.

Sometimes, the students got stuck in one gear, writing about the same topic or the same personal experience three or four times in a row. When this occurred, the teacher gave the student a nudge to try new things. A nudge suggested a slight push, or suggestion, in the right direction. These nudges were based on observation, on listening to children, and on a careful reading of their texts. The teacher tried to make suggestions specific in order to urge the student to try new things in order to improve their language abilities. As she questioned the student, she made sure each question was based on the student's

last response. This approach showed she was listening. The teacher always tried to summarize what she learned before she moved on.

Focused mini-lessons were presented regularly during guided writing. These mini-lessons were based on observations made as the teacher moved around the classroom and conferenced with the students. In these mini-lessons the teacher demonstrated specific tasks needed to become better writers.

Independent Writing

Gradually, the students were ready to engage in independent writing. The purpose of independent writing was to build fluency, establish the writing habit, make personal connections, explore meanings, promote critical thinking and use writing as a natural, pleasurable, self-chosen activity (Routman, 1991). The students had opportunities, many of which were student initiated, to write without teacher intervention or assessment. The students took responsibility for working out the challenges in the writing process. Students often wanted to write in the genre they were reading. Writing experiences included stories, narratives, letters, essays, informal reports, and pen pal exchanges. After students wrote about what they know, they were ready to move into the sharing aspect.

Sharing

Graves (1994) states that writing is a social act. Writers write for audiences. The teacher worked to provide a means for authors to share their work and to help their audience learn how to be good readers and listeners to the texts of others. The specific tasks that the students needed to learn in the sharing of writing were taught in mini-lessons and also demonstrated during the actual sharing of professionals' pieces, the teacher's writings and the students' writings. Elements, such as good leads, strong endings, use of strong precise verbs, author's approaches, and character development were focused on. As the students shared in a large group format, they learned the basic elements that helped them share in small groups without the teacher present. The teacher actively participated in group sharing with the students by attending to precise language, being a good listener, and sharing her own writing. Sharing their writing became a fulfilling experience. The students learned constructive means of responding so they were spared, in most cases, negative peer responses. Time was set aside several times a week for students to share their work.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the professional literature concerning the nature of the writing process, particularly with at-risk

adolescents, and ways to help them explore their voice when writing. The instructional implication of the project is that quality literature experiences presented in a classroom along with time to write affected the writing responses of the students and helped them develop their own writing voice. A collaborative experience between teacher and student and among peers greatly supported involvement in the writing process. The teacher participating in the writing periods, by doing and sharing her own writing with the students, seemed to affect in a positive manner the students' risk-taking in the process. They learned that writing is a process by which students create meaning and learn about themselves. Implementing the aspects of writing into an instructional program for at-risk adolescents energized them to write with style, content and voice.

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