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TE848 Writing Assessment & Instruction

Book Club Assignment

Summer 2020

Post 1:

With my internship year and first year of teaching combined, I have two years of teaching first grade under my belt. When reading *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* by Steve Graham, Charles MacArthur, and Michael Hebert, I found there were many ideas discussed that reminded me of my first year of teaching and helped me reflect on what I can work on to better help my students with writing.

Chapter 15 entitled, "Instruction for Students with Special Needs" discusses many challenges that students with disabilities have when writing such as transcription, sentence-level skills, composition skills, and motivation. During my internship in 2018, I had several SWD come in and out of my general education class throughout the day. They would come in for reading and math and then return to their ASD room for the remainder of the day. The extent of their writing was filling in the blanks on a worksheet and all of this took place in a different room. I always found it odd that these students were not scheduled to come to our room during our writing block, knowing the importance of practicing and developing a love for writing from a young age. As the year went on, I started to realize how much these students were missing out on during writing time and how much writing was neglected to these students. SWD can have many different challenges in each subject and I felt that having these students only focus on reading and math would only add to their challenges as they grow older. Last year I began working in my own classroom and did not have any SWD in my classroom. However, I did have many EL students. The majority of my class spoke Arabic as their main language at home. From the first day of school, I realized how big of a challenge not only reading for these students would be, but also writing. When reading chapter 15, I noticed many of the challenges that my EL students had with writing, were very similar to the challenges SWD have. One concept that stuck out to me was the challenge SWD have with sentence-level skills. Not only did some of my EL students struggle with their handwriting and spelling, but they also struggled putting their "ideas into words and placing those words into complete, syntactically appropriate and grammatically correct sentences that convey meaning they intend" (Graham et al., 2018, p. 361). Many of them would have trouble speaking appropriate sentences which made it extremely difficult to pick up a pencil and write them. When mixing the four common challenges many SWD experience when writing, you can imagine how frustrating that can be for any child, let alone a SWD or EL child. The last part of the chapter that stuck out to me was the part that discussed how motivation is a huge challenge for young writers. I think

that it is important to note that many elementary students struggle with motivation when writing whether they are a SWD or not. Elementary students struggle with motivation in any subject that does not interest them or one that they feel isn't their strongest. Saddler and Graham said, "SWD lack knowledge of why writing is important or personally relevant to them" (Graham et al., 2018, p. 361). I found in my own classroom that allowing students to write or read about something that is interesting or personally relevant to them, increases motivation and the desire to complete the task. Young children love to talk about themselves and their own interests, so if they can write about themselves it helps increase motivation.

The next chapter I read was Chapter 5 entitled "Writing from Source Material." The chapter discussed the ways to use source material when writing by saying "Whether indirectly or directly, ideas for writing are drawn from experiences, background knowledge, collaboration, interviews, observations, or other texts" (Graham et al., 2018, p. 108). When reading this chapter, it immediately made me think of mentor texts that I use when I teach writing in my classroom. During my writers' workshop mini-lesson each day, I love to pull a mentor text that models the task I am teaching the students to use. For example, if I am teaching my first graders how to compare two things in their writing, I will read a mentor text that day that clearly models the author comparing two things.

The last chapter I read was Chapter 7 entitled "Writing to Learn." The chapter discusses the idea of "incorporating writing into content-area subjects, and optimize its effects on learning" (Graham et al., 2018, p. 162). When reading this chapter, it reminded me of my internship year when we used visible thinking routines among all subjects. Some of these thinking routines included chalk talks, "think, puzzle, explore" and "sentence, phrase, word" activities. While all of these visible thinking routines were not necessarily long pieces of writing, they all required students to write down their thoughts on different topics. We used these visible thinking routines in science, social studies, reading, and even math. They were a great way to practice and integrate writing into all of the subject matters. I also feel that many students enjoy writing to learn, because it gives them the opportunity to write about what they are learning. For example, many of my students like to "show what they know" and this gives them the opportunity to do so.

In the article, "Guiding Students Through Expository Text with Text Feature Walks" Michelle Kelley and Nicki Clausen-Grace discuss the importance of

developing strategies such as text feature walks when reading expository texts. They say "Teachers must recognize factors within a text that can enhance or impair comprehension. These factors fall into three categories: text features, text organization, and text content" (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2010, p. 191). When reading expository texts, young students often skip over important text features such as the table of contents, index, glossary, bold words, sidebars, pictures, caption, etc. All of these text features are important and can truly enhance a student's comprehension of the material if they stop and observe them. This past year, many of my first graders enjoyed taking text feature walks before reading when in reading groups. However, when writing expository pieces many of the students did not enjoy including text features in their own writing. The more I pointed the features out during readers workshop, the more the students understood the importance of including text features in their own expository writing. I did not include text feature walks when reading to the whole group, and I think this will be something I will incorporate in my classroom this year.

References:

Graham, S., MacArthur., C.A., & Herbert, M. (2019, third edition). *Best practices in Writing Instruction*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Kelley, M. J., & Clausen-Grace, N. (2010). Guiding students through expository text with text feature walks. *The Reading Teacher*, 64(3), 191-195. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/791757713/fulltextPDF/83E9DDB8AF7B4BOCP/Q/13?accountid=12598>

Post 2:

Effective Ways of Being a Writing Teacher and Mentor

When reading *What a Writer Needs* by Ralph Fletcher I learned so many things that helped me understand the process of writing and the process of teaching writing. Effective ways of being a mentor and teaching writing voice and time are just a few of the many concepts that I found were interesting and helpful.

The first section I read from Fletcher's book that really stuck out to me was at the very beginning in Chapter 1. He began discussing mentors, and the importance they can have on a student or their mentee. He tells a story about a time when he spent a week with a poet named Robert Stock in New Orleans. When Fletcher told him that he needed to change just one word from the piece he was working on, Stock laughs him off and says he's thrown away hundreds of poems for that reason. Fletcher says "A mentor does not praise mediocre work. A mentor knows the sound and the feel of language skillfully used. The novice writer, who is becoming alive to the possibilities of language, respects that" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 13). When reading this quote it made me think of my mentor teacher from my internship. She embodied this quote and never allowed mediocre work from myself or her students. She set the standard and expressed her expectations for myself and her students from the start of the year and we all strived to meet those expectations. The feeling myself and the students had when our mentor would express how proud she was of us, made the work feel more rewarding. It made us feel that we weren't only working hard for ourselves, but also for the person that was mentoring and guiding us. I took what I learned from the internship and my mentor teacher and applied it to my own classroom. From the very beginning of the year, I set the standards and expectations high for my students, so they knew that I always expected my students to work hard and never allow themselves to create mediocre work. I think setting these standards at the very beginning of the year really helped my students thrive and grow, and have something to work for each and every day.

Fletcher also highlights the importance of a mentor encouraging their students to take risks. He says "We need to redefine the success ethic, not just in writing classes but during the entire school day, to mean not only 'Did you get it right?' but also 'Did you take a chance?'" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 17). It is important for us as mentors to first, create an environment where our students feel safe and supported to take educational and social risks in the classroom. Then once the students feel like they

are in a safe, positive classroom environment, we can encourage them to take those risks in any subject or social situation. One of two things can happen when a student takes a risk: It pays off and the student feel rewarded or it doesn't and the student may feel sad or embarrassed. It is our job as mentors to make the student feel rewarded and appreciative even if the result wasn't what they hoped for. Students should not be afraid to take risks, but excited for what they outcome could be!

Another section from Fletcher's book that stuck out to me was Chapter 6 where discusses the importance of a writer's voice, especially when writing personal narratives. He says "The poet Suzanne Gardinier says that voice in writing has much to do with an *intimacy* between writer and subject: a closeness between the author and what is being written about" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 72). This stuck out to me because many kids I have worked with in lower elementary do not have as hard of a problem with this compared to older students. In my opinion, students in lower elementary feel more comfortable taking risks in their writing and listening to their inner voice. Whereas, students in upper elementary block their inner voice because they may feel more reserved and uncomfortable listening to it and writing their true thoughts on the page. Fletcher says "Such distance can impart a cold, detached feel to the writing. When a real voice, you can sense the author pulling in close, cozying up to the subject" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 72). Fletcher also mentions that students may have trouble finding and using their inner voice in their writing because of the audience that will read their writing. Many writers have insecurities and worries when it comes to the audience that will read their writing. This is why mentors need to encourage their students to take risks in their writing and give them a gentle push to use their inner voice to enhance their writing. One way to help students that are having trouble using their inner voice in writing, would be to read them a mentor text that displays an author using their inner voice to enhance their writing. For example, reading a mentor text that clearly displays the characters' thoughts and emotions shows the students how a writer can use their inner voice while explaining the characters' feelings.

The last section of Fletcher's book that stuck out to me was in Chapter 11 entitled "A Playfulness with Time. Fletcher's discusses a number of challenges students endure with the idea of time. He says "Time-wise, the writer faces a dual challenge: how to handle the element of time in one's writing, but on a more basic, practical level, how to find time to write" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 127). The first part of this quote addresses the challenge of how to handle time in one's writing. One way to handle

the element of time in one's writing is by having students develop a focus. Fletcher says "We need to teach students how to write small, not just in terms of detail but also in terms of moments, slices of time" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 138). Instead of writing about an entire day and all the events that took place, encourage students to take one event from the day and expand on that with details. This reminded me of our "Small Moments" unit that we teach in first grade. First, we teach the students to think of a "watermelon idea" which is a big topic idea such as "One day it was snowing outside." Then we teach the students to think of a "watermelon slice idea" which is a smaller topic such as "I went outside to play in the snow." Last, we teach the students to think of a "seed idea" which is the small moment such as "The time someone threw a snowball at me and it hurt!" Students take the seed idea and write an entire story based off of that small seed moment. Encouraging students to think and write about a small moment really helps them with the concept of time. It drives them to focus on just one moment and include all of the details and emotions that were included in that single moment. It also helps students keep their writing clear and precise. Fletcher also mentions encouraging students to write a timeline of an entire day, and having students pick only one event from the timeline to write about. I think this is a great strategy for helping students understand what a small moment idea is and how they can focus their writing on one event.

In an article entitled "Finding 'Real' Lives: Writing and Identity" by Linda Laidlaw, she discusses the importance of identity for young writers in her classroom. She writes about her students stories and herself learning and developing as a teacher and writer. One part of the article that stuck out to me was when she was discussing the topics that some students choose to write about. She says "Certain topics are deemed 'inappropriate' for children's stories and writing. As teachers, we often suggest safe and boring topics which will not evoke forbidden responses." (Laidlaw, 1998, p. 129). This made me think back to *What a Writer Needs* by Ralph Fletcher because Fletcher says that it is our job as mentors to encourage our students to take risks in their writing. How can a student take the risks they want to take if they are constrained to a certain topic or are not allowed to write about certain things? I see why teachers may get uncomfortable when reading a students work that may be about controversial topics. However, if writing is their outlet to get in touch with their experiences or emotions, I believe it is something to be encouraged, not taken away. Laidlaw says we should "work with children in ways in which they may explore possible selves." She then says "A child doesn't make his own mind. Its just

there. Your job is to see what's in it" (Laidlaw, 1998, p. 129). I found this to be a powerful statement. Our job as educators is to encourage students to express their thoughts not only aloud, but as writers on paper. We shouldn't limit students if we expect them to take risks.

References:

Fletcher, R. (2013, second edition). *What a Writer Needs*. Heinemann.

Laidlaw, Linda. (1998). Finding "Real" Lives: Writing and Identity. *Language Arts*. Vol. 75, Iss. 2, 126-131. Retrieved from <https://search-proquest-com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/docview/196844380/fulltextPDF/3C5627D219AB407FPQ/1?accountid=12598>

Post 3:

For this poetry unit, I chose to read and analyze the book *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School* by Georgia Heard. While reading this book, I found there were many ideas that I found interesting about writing poetry and teaching poetry. Poetry is a genre I have always struggled to write and teach, but this book helped me realize the power of poetry.

The first take-away from Heard's book that I found compelling was surprisingly in the introduction entitled "Poetry, Like Bread, Is For Everyone." Being someone who has never truly enjoyed or appreciated poetry, I had a hard time understanding how people found the words to write a poem. When reading a poem I would often think "Where do people come up with these words?" The introduction of the book discusses how poetry is an art that is used by people every single day, without them even knowing it. Whether it is tucking your child into bed or words you say to your significant other when you wake up, the voice we have in these instances are unique, beautiful, and poetic. Heard says "When we speak in a voice that's exclusively ours, that's natural, when we're not trying to be anything other than ourselves, that's the stuff of poetry (Heard, 1999, p. XV). I found this idea very interesting because the emotion, feeling, and beauty we have in our minds and voices often get lost and never make it to paper. Heard believes that poetry is within us and the only way to write it is to reach into our feelings and emotions.

The second take-away from Heard's book that I found extremely relatable and enlightening came from Chapter 3 Entitled "Writing Poetry: Where Does Poetry Hide?" She begins the chapter explaining an experience she had in her classroom many years ago when she began teaching poetry. When reading it, I noticed how similar her thoughts were to mine when teaching poetry. Many years ago, she believed that when teaching poetry, she had to come up with "poetry starters" and guide the children into writing something creative. Teaching poetry my first year of teaching, I did the exact same. When I continued reading this chapter, Heard explains that poetry "is often right in front of us in the everyday things and people in our lives" (Heard, 1999, p. 48). Later in the book she says "we all have memories and images that we hold inside; writing poems allows us to explore them" (Heard, 1999, p. 66). Heard believes that instead of writers using memories to write poetry, we actually use poetry to explore the memories and images we hold inside. Poetry

and inspiration is all around us, if you are willing to find it and give it attention, it can blossom and be something really beautiful.

In Chapter 3, Heard also includes many student poetry samples that are weaved throughout the book. I really enjoyed reading these samples because they helped me see the true magic that can be made from a child when they write from their heart. Heard made an interesting point that I never thought about. She said "Many kids think that the subjects of poems should only be love, flowers, or weeping willow trees" (Heard, 1999, p. 53). I found this so interesting because this is exactly what I remember being taught in elementary school. I feel like I took this idea and taught it to my first graders during my first year of teaching, because it is "easier" to teach them to write about the "pretty parts." She then goes on to say that kids should be encouraged to write about whatever they feel, even if it's not pretty. She says "Poetry is about telling the whole truth of what we see happening around us" (Heard, 1999, p. 54) such as wars, poverty, or homelessness. When reading this chapter, it really made me stop and think about the way I teach. Instead of pushing myself and my students, I sometimes teach what's easy instead of what's best. Instead of teaching my students to write their poems about what they enjoy or what they are feeling, I often would encourage them to write happy things because it was what was easiest to teach and easiest for them to write. I think this is something I want to improve for my students. After reading this chapter, it made me realize the amount of goodness that can come from allowing students to write poetry that comes from their mind.

The last main take-away I had from reading Heard's book came from Chapter 4 entitled "Crafting Poetry: Toolboxes." Heard believes that, when introducing poetry to students, it is beneficial to "introduce the craft using the metaphor of a toolbox" (Heard, 1999, p. 64). She explains that the first toolbox, the meaning toolbox, serves to help the reader "imagine, visualize, and be brought close to the experience of the poem." This is where the poet expresses feelings through tools such as imagery, metaphor, simile, or personification. The second toolbox, the music toolbox, serves to "help the reader experience the poem through "sound, music, and rhythm." This is where the poet expresses feelings through tools such as rhyme, repetition, rhythm, or alliteration. When seeing this visual of the toolboxes, I truly felt that it helped me get a better understanding of the important tools that should be addressed when writing a poem or teaching how to write a poem. When teaching a poetry unit for my first graders, I think it would be overwhelming to teach them

all of these tools at once. I think it would be fun to use real toolboxes or draw them on chart paper. Then I could teach one tool from each toolbox at a time. When I feel that the class has mastered the tool, we could add it to our class toolbox and I could begin teaching a new set of tools. When all the poetry tools have been taught, students can then begin choosing which ever tools they enjoy using to create and write their own poem.

The poem I chose to share from this unit is from Georgia Heard's book *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School*. This poem came from Chapter 3 entitled "The Homeless." I found this poem very powerful because it proves that poetry does not always have to be inspired by pretty and happy things. Poetry is powerful even when it is inspired by sad, heavy, or controversial topics. I also think that this poem shows that a poem does not have to be lengthy and wordy to make an impact. It is short, yet extremely powerful and speaks volumes.

Heard, G. (1999). *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School*. Heinemann.