

Partnerships in the Writing Workshop: Supporting Young Writers During Independent Writing

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Abstract

During writing workshop, our young writers are called to write. Learners must engage in the reading and writing processes in authentic settings to grow as readers and writers. Support must be offered to our younger learners as they are developing their literacy skills and independence. This article infuses Vygotsky's social learning theory in writing workshop through partnerships as students work towards independence. Writing partnerships were implemented in second grade classroom with the goal to scaffold students as they build their stamina as writers. The research questions examined are (1) How do students utilize writing time? (2) What topics do students explore in their conversations during Writer's Workshop? (3) How are students engaged in the writing process (i.e. brainstorming, drafting, editing/revising, publishing)? The findings indicate that as students became familiar with the routine, their stamina increased; students were less likely to interrupt peer conferences and worked independently through difficult moments; and students were problem solvers and supporters of each other's writing. Teaching implications are provided to increase students' stamina for independent work.

Introduction

My classroom is home to 23 energetic second graders. Throughout the day, it is common to see my students engaged in cooperative learning environments. Our classroom is built on the idea that we are a classroom family. Within our classroom community, seven students are developing readers due to reading below grade level expectations on grade level benchmarks. Two students are English Language learners and both have received formal education in their native languages. Three students received Speech services due to articulation concerns. The class consists of two African American students, 1 Asian student, and 21 White students. Each student brings unique experiences to our collective whole and we work to appreciate our diversity. We value each other's thoughts. We listen to other's ideas. We respond to our classmates with kind and compassionate words. Our classroom values reading and writing. We work and learn within workshop models for both reading and writing instruction. During this time, our class meets together as a whole for a mini-lesson that is targeted at the needs of the class and then students are sent off to read and write independently. Small group instruction and individual conferencing are the heart of our classroom instruction and occur during independent work time.

At the beginning of the school year, several weeks were spent establishing routines and procedures for independent work. We learned how to work with partners, and what independent work time should look and sound like during our reading and writing workshops. Time was spent teaching specific strategies students could use to build their stamina during independent reading and our class charted our growth as we increased our time on task during independent reading time. During writing workshop, I modeled the writing process, ways to begin brainstorming, and expectations for independent writing time. Students then worked independently and all seemed to be going well until our time for independent writing began to increase.

Approximately forty-five minutes is scheduled each day for writing workshop. Mini-lessons are planned to last around ten minutes and at least five minutes is saved at the end of writing workshop for a share of some kind. Students seemed to be enjoying independent writing, were on task, and would share their interest and excitement around writing. Once independent writing time passed a certain time, which for our class was around 12 minutes, our sweet hum of writing work would begin to derail and students lost focus. It was at this point that I decided to implement writing partnerships during independent writing time. The purpose of this paper is to explore what intentional decisions teachers can make when students lack stamina for independent work. The research questions examined are (1) How do students utilize writing time? (2) What topics do students explore in their conversations during Writer's Workshop? (3) How are students engaged in the writing process (i.e. brainstorming, drafting, editing/revising, publishing)?

Literature Review

Mentors can serve as a powerful support for young learners. Teachers make intentional decisions while planning and selecting mentor texts and conferring. Kissel, Miller, and Hansen (2013) suggest that "student writers [can] serve as mentors for one another" (p. 5). An additional support that we can offer young writers is a peer mentor with whom they can share their writing with and problem solve together. Cazden (1988) states that the use of collaborative peers improves comprehension and engagement. This setting provides students the opportunity to continue working without assistance from the teacher and bridges the gap towards independence. Building time into the school day for students to talk about their writing provides the opportunity for measureable benefits. This time allows students to make meaningful connections and solidify their learning (Allington & Gabriel, 2012).

Writing is a process that becomes internalized as it is practiced. Young writers can often struggle to put their thoughts on paper and by talking about their challenging thoughts with a peer, students can be supported through their struggles (Graves & Hansen, 1983). Students need an environment where they develop their problem-solving skills. Graves (2004) suggests that “through the process of sharing their writing and showing it to others, [students] begin to acknowledge other ways of thinking” (p. 90). When working independently during writing workshop, students have full ownership of their work. They are selecting ideas and developing stories of their own. Graves (1993) states that children need to have ownership of their writing. During the writing process, students must make moves as writers. These are actions and decisions that will decide how their stories are developed. This process is very messy and students must think critically during their independent writing time (Graves, 2004).

Lev Vygotsky (1986) states that “what the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow” (p. 188). Vygotsky’s psychosocial theory of education states that children learn best when they are provided interaction with more knowledgeable individuals. Teachers facilitate the learning instead of providing direct instruction. Vygotsky believed that learning should take place within the context of a socially meaningful activity that is “directly related to the cognitive development theory that learning is directly related to the social interactions that occur within the learning environment” (Good, 2011, p. 167-168). The Zone of Proximal Development

...is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Once the child reaches the level of their ZPD, learning may continue in an ongoing process where new goals are set to drive the student to the next highest level of learning (Levykh, 2008). Vygotsky believed that the goal of the ZPD was for students to internalize their new learnings and behavior because it is only then that “the new information and behaviors [can] become permanent” (Levykh, 2008, p. 97).

Knowing that discussion supports and fosters student engagement, I decided to implement writing partnerships during independent writing time within writing workshop.

Data Collection

During writing workshop, students were excited to start writing each day; however, it seemed that our classroom lost the focus of writing once students reached a certain point. To confirm my observations, data regarding student engagement was collected during a pre-implementation phase of ten days to have a clear understanding of students’ needs during the implementation phase of this project. During this pre-implementation phase, students’ time on task was recorded from the start of independent writing time. Once students were settled at their writing spot, the timer started. Time on task refers to students’ actions during independent writing time. The following chart describes the focus of student work during Writer’s Workshop and sources used to collect data for each focus.

Research Questions	Data Sources
How do the students utilize writing time?	Engagement inventories were used to track students time while writing. Anecdotal notes were kept describing students’ work and actions.
What topics do students explore in their conversations during Writer’s Workshop?	I observed writing conversations to listen to talking points between students. I specifically listened and made note of what students shared (i.e. Did students read their writing and move to another task?) and how students responded to their peer.
How are students engaged in the writing process (i.e. brainstorming, drafting, editing/revising, publishing)?	At the end of Writer’s Workshop, I collect students’ writing folders to monitor the development of their work.

While the timer was ticking, I observed my students work independently and made notes after 1-minute intervals using the above time on task behaviors. At the end of the pre-implementation phase, the average time on task for the class was calculated. The same routines and procedures were used to measure student engagement after the implementation of writing partnerships. In summary, data collection included observations, conferring, and student writing samples.

Description of Implementation

Based on data gathered from student work samples from our first narrative writing unit, partnerships were established. I paired students based on writing behaviors observed to ensure that support would be provided. Data sources examined students' writing samples and their understanding of structure (lead, transitions, ending, organization, overall structure), development (elaboration and craft), and conventions (spelling and punctuation). I analyzed trends and partnered students based on their strengths and weaknesses. For example, a student who needed support writing strong leads was partnered with a student who could model and provide constructive feedback on leads. The goal of creating partnerships was for students to be able to build stamina and begin to problem solve during independent writing.

Several days were spent establishing routines and procedures for writing partnerships. A t-chart was created during class discussions that honored students' and teacher's suggestions for expectations. For example, during independent writing time, partnerships may sit back-to-back while they are writing but can turn and sit hip-to-hip when offering feedback or sharing. Our anchor chart listed roles for students when they were talking (sharing) and listening (providing feedback). Over the course of several days, we began to develop a strong base for conversation focused on writing within our classroom. As authors, students had an authentic setting to share their writing. This allowed a meaningful context for students to build reading fluency, conveying

their emotions through their expression, and a supportive environment to edit and revise. Students also strengthened their skills for listening and providing meaningful and constructive feedback to their peers. Students developed their active listening skills by understanding the importance of showing their partner they were listening to their stories. We discussed the importance of looking at our partners while they were sharing, giving compliments to let the author know what they did well, and providing thoughtful comments that would help the writer improve his/her writing. The opportunity for feedback provided students with a springboard for peer support. Students could work together to problem solve and allowed ownership in the process.

Data Analysis

Over the course of the second narrative writing unit, which focused on using picture books as mentors for our writing, writing partnerships were a part of our daily writing workshop. After the whole class mini-lesson, students would gather their materials, meet their partners at their working spot and continue writing. The first finding uncovers that as students became familiar with the routine, their stamina increased. Before partnerships were implemented, students could write on average for 12 minutes before independent writing time ended. With partnerships, students increased their independent writing time to an average of 23 minutes.

Secondly, students were less likely to interrupt peer conferences and worked independently through difficult moments. For example, one student, who wanted more support during unit one, shared that he was “stuck” on writing a strong beginning for his story. He shared that he talked with his partner and together they decided that it would be best for him to add dialogue to the beginning of his story. The student attempted revising his beginning and was successful at adding dialogue. Each day within the implementation of writing partnerships, our

classroom was buzzing with rich talk. One partnership discussed moves they could make to develop their characters. One student shared, “I want to show how much fun it was!”, when writing about a family trip to an amusement park over summer break. His partner suggested, “That’s a great idea! Can you tell me more details about the park?”

The last finding highlights how students were problem solvers and supporters of each other’s writing. For instance, a student commented that she did not have enough “story to share”. Her partner offered this suggestion, “You can always come back to it later! Write about something else that you’re excited about!” It is important to note that partnerships were effective scaffolds for my developing writers who needed more support due to their diverse needs. One student, who reads below grade level and has had intensive support around building knowledge of word parts and word-solving strategies, was overheard explaining to his partner how he worked through writing a “tricky word”. He shared that he was trying to write about an overnight stay during a family vacation by writing: “We spent the night in a hotel.” The student initially wrote /night/ as /nite/. He told his partner, “This doesn’t look right.” His partner suggested that he think of another word that he knew that sounded like /night/. The student replied, “LIGHT! I know how to spell light and it can help me spell night!”

Reflection

Writing workshop is built on a foundation of independence. Students must be able to work independently and be strategic problem solvers to remain independent while the teacher works with students in small groups and through conferring. This independence must be built and supported before it is expected. Partnerships in writing workshop helped to support my students as they built their independence as writers. The meaningful talk that students engaged in with their partners provided authentic settings to engage in and discuss their writing. Students

applied their knowledge by problem solving as writers. While partnering students based on writing sample data was successful, I would like to continue my work with partnerships and vary how the students are grouped. Instead of keeping partnerships consistent every day, maybe students could have two partners and on “A-days” meet with partner 1 and on “B-days” meet with partner 2. This would provide more feedback and allow the purpose of partnerships to grow. In thinking of future decisions, conversation prompts would be helpful to help students develop a “talk” for offering compliments and suggestions. As students are building their ideas for stories, partnerships would allow students to “see” new stories by hearing their peers’ ideas and perspectives. Diversity would be honored and encouraged by allowing students to experience different perspectives. Students can grow as writers and their independence can be supported using writing partnerships.

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