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Developing young authors: Collaborating in a supportive community

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ABSTRACT

When a classroom provides an environment that promotes writing, students have the resources, time, and opportunity to create collaborative stories. In a third grade classroom, three girls unite to write a series of humorous stories through group negotiation and class prompting. The classroom's instructional design and its sharing, encouraging climate promoted writing.

The original reason to be in Room 8 was to observe the influence of a genre of humorous material on the children's writing through a qualitative study designed to examine reading-writing connections. The variety of interactions and responses in the classroom allowed for phenomena to surface which could not be foreseen when the study was originally designed. Within the classroom community of writers, a collaborative effort emerged among three girls who created a series of stories, a relationship and process worthy of examination.

What does a classroom promoting collaboration in reading and writing look like? Let's visit Room 8, a third grade class in a suburban school district in the Midwest. Spending mornings with this class, you see children participating in reading, language, and writing instruction in large blocks of time. You see the children investigate a genre of humorous materials in a variety of formats and media for their reading and language period.

The children read and discuss literature, view and discuss humorous material, and explore personal interests among genre materials in whole class, small group or individual activities. They follow a similar practice in writing workshop. Some children write on their own; others

work in small groups. The students in the groups talk about ideas for or in their writing, share their writing for responses, or work on group projects.

On most days Heather, Maria, and Rebecca (pseudonyms), write together at a table toward the side of the room. Sometimes they write individually, but they also collaborate on stories. The girls discuss ideas and write group stories that they enjoy sharing with the class for feedback. Over several weeks they create and share a series of humorous stories. As we view the girls' writing group, we have an image of how a community spirit develops in a reading and writing environment that promotes collaborative learning and encourages authors.

The 'Rose' Stories

At the end of writer's workshop one day, the girls share the first story. Rebecca introduces the story by saying, "It's romantic and gross."

Hi, my name s Rose. I'm in the fourth grade. On the day before Valentines I got a love letter. It was taped to my crayon box. This is what it said...

Dear Rose

You are like a rose blossen in a big garden. I love you.

Love Your

Secret admire

P.S. Your Next love letter will be in your favorit spot.

I didn't know were it came form. But I was soon to find out.

Thus begins the tale of young Rose as she searches for her admirer. As Rebecca reads the story, the class responds with laughter. The laughter tells the writer that the audience perceives the message and purpose of the writing. But we also sense a community feeling of well-being as children share laughter (Fakih, 1993).

The next day I got to school an hour early. But when I looked on the teacher's desk I couldn't find it. Do you want to know why I couldn't find it? Don't tell but SHE THROUGH IT AWAY! When I looked in the trash can there it was all crumbled up. This is what it said...

Dear Rose,

I love you dearly. So it is time for us to meet.

Love Your

~~Clayton~~

I could not beleave who it was. And why he would like me. The next day I went to see him were he said he would meet me. I got so carryed away that I acedently got him cornered in the corner... and pushed him...

Classmates respond with praise for the content and suggestions for more jokes to be done to the boy. The laughter and suggestions motivate the girls to add to the adventure.

If you want to find out what he is going to do next. Find our next book called PART TWO SIXTH GRADE.

Writing Time

As Nancy Atwell (1998), among others, has suggested, students need regular blocks of time to think, to write, to confer, to read, to change their minds, and then to write some more. It is within those large blocks of time that young students form a community of writers, a community based on mutual trust and encouragement.

For Room 8, writer's workshop occupies the first hour of each day. Following an initial mini-lesson on a specific writing skill, the children spend 35 minutes writing while the teacher and aides wander the room, interacting with students who might ask for help or advice and having writing conferences with students. During this time, the children are free to write individually, with partners, or in small groups. For the last ten minutes of writer's workshop, children share their writing.

The teacher creates a relaxed atmosphere in the class by allowing the children freedom to move around the room as they work. Students choose various places in the room to write and conference. Some choose to stay at their desks; some move into groups to work. Some choose to sit at the tables in the room, even though they are writing individually.

Children at the table become a support or resource group. They ask each other for feedback on sections of their writing, ask for a word

that means..., or ask for an idea to include in their topic. Peer and teacher conferences occur at various places in the room — at desks or tables, on the floor, in the reading center. Although there is a great deal of movement and grouping, the noise level of the class is never overbearing. Writers are busy crafting their pieces, which is the focus of the class.

The day after the class response to Rose's adventures in fourth grade, Heather, Maria, and Rebecca are at the table writing a sequel about Rose being in sixth grade. The girls are deciding what will happen to Rose and what will be done to the boy. The story takes on new characters and strange twists. When they share this in-progress story, their classmates again laugh at the situations written.

All of a sudden Anthony walked up and said, "Do you want to go out?" I don't like him so I said "NO" My friends saw me and started to tease me about him.

The next day I was so embarrassed that I pushed him in the pool at school. And he was so excited that he lost his undershorts and everyone found out that he wore Barney underwear.

As the girls consider writing more, they ask the class to vote on a continuation of the saga. One student comments, "This is a series," and this assures the next episode. Classmates comment on the funny situations in the story and comment that the time order in the story does not seem right. After sharing the second 'Rose' story and receiving constructive comments, Heather and Rebecca revise some content with Maria's ideas. The story had Valentine's Day and the Fourth of July occurring at the same time. So the girls decided that since the boy was pushed in a pool, the time of the story had to be summer. The story was revised to include a meeting to watch fireworks.

Writing with Reading

Because learning to write is a complex process, teachers recognize the need to use multiple approaches to help students develop this ability. In an integrated curriculum where reading and writing are taught in relationship to one another, as Louise Rosenblatt (1976) points out, readers gain diverse insights and satisfactions from the text material by actively creating meaning. Such reading and writing activities involve children in meaningful learning experiences that enhance the ability of students' awareness of language and language use.

During the language arts period in Room 8, the teacher reads *Ramona Quimby, Age 8* by Beverly Cleary aloud for 15-20 minutes each day. Heather, Maria, and Rebecca enjoy the read-aloud book so much that they select other Beverly Cleary books for individual reading. Rebecca chooses *Ramona Forever* for a literature set book, and both she and Maria check out other Ramona books from the school library. As the next class read-aloud Heather requests *Beezus and Ramona* by Beverly Cleary.

Just as Beverly Cleary created situations for humorous events, the girls create situational humor. The girls' stories are a verifiable writing form, because as Wilde (1985) explains, it exists in a trade book which provides structure for the writing. As Heather, Rebecca, and Maria write their stories, they discuss how Ramona had "all those things" happening to her. They want the girl and boy in their story to be doing things that appear silly to others.

Reading and writing are process-oriented thinking skills. In reading and writing, ideas are constructed and reconstructed while comprehending and composing text. As children experience a genre study, Phillips (1986) found that they began to produce the genre form (or structure) in their writing. They assimilate words and more global and substantive aspects of a genre into their writing (Tierney and Shanahan, 1991). What is known and thought is revealed through their writing.

While in their group the girls have opportunities to explore and work out differences about story ideas and actions. They are able to negotiate among different perspectives of situations to include in the stories. Hanssen (1990) reported that in groups of three or four people, when topics and perspectives are introduced and shared, participants are able to develop their perspectives more fully. For the first story Heather and Maria want the boy and girl to play together at recess. Rebecca has different ideas. She wants something to happen to the boy. Ideas are battered around until the group decides on having the girl accidentally push the boy in her excitement of discovering her secret admirer.

When collaborating on writing tasks, the girls exchange, examine, and expand ideas. The discussion provides them opportunities to engage in problem-solving for unclear content (Leal, 1993). Heather, talking about the advantage of the group writing, said, "they were able to talk things out."

Continuing Saga

As you watch Heather, Maria, and Rebecca over several weeks, you see them writing long stories which express complex ideas. Features

from their reading give the girls many forms of humor to experiment with in their writing.

You now that boy named, Anthony, well he is getting cutier everyday.

The next day I went to the Max [a store] and saw that Anthony and Kelly were sipping a shake together. That really got me mad and I went over there and said "You are a no good dirty double crosser!!!" Then I knocked over the table and she got milkshake all over her new white blouse. She was so mad that she sprayed mustard all over my new jeans. I started getting really rough, so I threw an egg at her head. Then Anthony got up and said "I don't remember you liking me," and he tried to brake us up, but instead he got knocked out.

As Graves (1983) expressed, time for thinking and shaping ideas is an important factor in developing writing. When the girls present the full story of Rose in eighth grade at sharing time, the class erupts in laughter. The girls' writing is a huge success as classmates enjoy the surprise, slapstick, and verbal humor. You would hear comments like "My favorite [story] is the 'Secret Admirer' series."

The class provides a supportive environment for the girls to write. Without the laughter and comments of the group, the young authors would not experience the thrill of positive response to their writing.

Community

You see in Room 8 a classroom climate that promotes writing in a supportive, daily, concentrated workshop. This format contributes to writing development, because a feeling of community exists in which children feel comfortable sharing incomplete writing and receiving constructive suggestions. From this encouragement children write more. And when humor is involved, children are even more relaxed and receptive to learning.

The real value of collaborative writing is in the peer interaction as groups concern themselves with the whole writing process (Dale, 1994). One student might begin a story with another adding a sentence or part, while the third student finishes the piece or evaluates the others' work. During the whole process students are actively engaged with each other and the writing task. While writing, each member learns to communicate thoughts as the group works to create a story (Brockman, 1994). From topic selection to final revisions, students talk and negotiate in order to write.

As their stories develop, the girls decide on a division of labor. Heather begins to draft the next sequel from the ideas brainstormed. She often stops to ask for opinions about a section or to check what was in the previous story. Rebecca revises the previous story and often asks for help with a word or some other editing point. Maria decides to illustrate the boy's letters in the first story. As she draws, she asks for opinions about what to include in the drawings or if they think her ideas are okay.

Working with others gives writers ideas and interpretations beyond their own ability. The response of others provides stimulation and encouragement to improve, continue, or produce alternate forms of writing. Later the girls convert the stories into a play to present at the end of the genre study. The girls negotiate converting story description into dialogue and narrator parts. They decide which parts will be left out and add parts to clarify the story for the audience. They add a final episode to the sequence that has the boy and girl in high school and becoming engaged.

Although writing is highly idiosyncratic, the girls follow a pattern of prewrite, draft, revise, and edit. During the writing process, the girls assume responsibility for their own writing and become, in the root meaning of the word, "authors." They comment, "[Writer's workshop] makes you feel like you can do a lot of stuff."

Developing Authors

The classroom and classmates are important to the girls. The community within the classroom offers a social setting that allows the girls to join together to develop stories. They talk, negotiate, and expand ideas. Freedom to choose with whom, where, and what to write enhances their freedom to create.

The girls draw on collective knowledge and construct new ideas to create stories as they work together. When classmates perceive the message in the girls' stories and provide feedback, the girls are encouraged to write more. As Rebecca said, "You get inspired by something and want to write."

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