Little Teachers and Teaching Elementary Students the Writing Process

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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Abstract

This project focuses on helping elementary students develop an understanding for the writing process. There is an example of a children's book I have written along with the steps I took in writing the book which includes a presentation I delivered to two first grade classes. There is also a description of how I will use this book in an elementary classroom to help students discover the steps a writer must go through in order to produce an acceptable piece of writing. Finally, I have reflected on my experiences with this project and how it has helped me become a better writer.
Acknowledgments

Thank you to Dr. Diane Bottomley for all her willingness to help me with this project and for giving me many wonderful suggestions and ideas. Thanks to Cathy Hahn and Norma Ruttan's first grade classes at St. Mary's for allowing me to read my book to them and giving me comments on how to improve it. Thanks also to my mother, Judy Bredenkamp, who has inspired me to write and has encouraged my efforts.
Introduction

Ever since I was a young child, I loved to write. Whether it be poems, stories, or simply homework assignments, I could not get enough of writing. My aspirations to become a writer are becoming more and more evident as I grow older. My goal as a future elementary school teacher is to instill this same appreciation in my students in hopes that they too may become aspiring authors.
Little Teachers

I first began writing Little Teachers in the Spring of 1999. Within an hour, I had created a story that I consider one of my best works. In the past few months, I have spent many hours revising and correcting my book in order to make it an exceptional piece of children's literature.

On November 30, 1999, I was given an experience that I feel every author should have. I presented my unfinished book to two classes of first graders at St. Mary's Elementary School in Muncie, Indiana. Norma Ruttan and Cathy Hahn were generous enough to take time out of their busy schedules to allow me to come into their classrooms. My presentation, which took approximately 40 minutes, consisted of an introduction by Dr. Bottomley, a presentation of my book, a discussion period where the children offered comments and suggestions, and a creative time for the children to draw pictures of how they perceive the characters in the book look since my book contains no illustrations. I have included the drawings that I received from the children.

This was a wonderful opportunity to see first-hand how my target audience feels about my work. I was very pleased with the response I received from the children. They gave me wonderful comments and suggestions. One suggestion given was to make the book longer by adding more characters. I took this into consideration and decided to add two more characters to my book. Another suggestion was to make the book funnier. When I considered this comment, I came to the conclusion that the story is funny enough as it is. My reasons for this are that I do not want too much silliness to distract from the moral of the book.

I received many positive comments from the children. Several children said that they think the story is funny. Others said that they feel that the story is very nice. I loved hearing all their comments and suggestions because it allowed me to test my story on the exact people my story is meant for. The fact that they like the story is a good indication that my story is suitable for that particular age level.

After my presentation with the children, I went home and revised my book keeping in mind the suggestions they had given me. Seeing the children's wonderful drawings of the characters in the book gave me a great idea. When it came time to do the illustrations, I decided to make the book an interactive book by allowing the children to decide for themselves what the characters look like. For this reason, the book contains only text. Beside each page of text, I have included a blank page for the children to draw each character using crayons. The front cover of the book contains a pair of blue overalls with a pocket. Inside the pocket, children can find a box of crayons which can be used for their drawings. The book can be used over and over again since the crayon markings can be easily wiped off of the laminated pages.
The Writing Process

Writing is such an important skill that every child needs to be taught. Being able to read and write is such a key component in our society today. We are faced with events everyday that require us to use these skills such as taking messages, writing checks, reading menus and signs, writing letters, and making shopping lists. According to Lucy McCormick Calkins (1991), we want children to value writing. In order to do this, we need to make children aware of how beneficial writing is to our lives. We also need to teach them how to write effectively.

Teachers can instruct children in writing by teaching them the writing process and the benefit of each step. The first step involved is brainstorming. The brainstorming for my book occurred one day while I was driving home from school. Although I did not record my ideas on paper right away, I did organize my thoughts in my head.

The idea to create this book came to mind while I was thinking about my 23 year-old sister who is a Speech Pathologist. I remembered hearing stories about all the wonderful children she works with and how each one is special. This gave me the idea to write a book about children who are special in their own way.

When I arrived home from school that day, I quickly jotted all my ideas down on notebook paper. My initial thoughts were to write the book about children who have disabilities, but I realized that not every child in a classroom has disabilities. So, I decided to write a book that discusses how each child is different and how other children can learn from them.

Using personal experiences, such as the ones my sister told me about, I was able to begin to form a picture about what I was going to write about. Since writing comes from events of our daily lives (Graves 1994), teachers need to encourage children to write about things they know or have experienced. Donald Graves feels that the first job of a writer is to listen to and observe life. Sometimes, it is hard for children to realize that they actually have something to say (1994). Real life experiences can give students a variety of topics to write about and can help them realize that they do have something to say.

The next step in the writing process is writing the first draft. This part of the process requires the writer to organize and compile all of his/her thoughts and to record them on paper. When children write their first drafts, it is important that they are given the freedom to write without worrying about spelling and mechanics. This is the point at which children should be encouraged to use invented spelling. Although the children may misspell words at this point in the process, the content of the piece of writing is the primary focus. If children spend too much time worrying about spelling each word correctly, they may lose track of what they are saying or get discouraged. While invented spelling is encouraged, it is also important for the children to go back and correct their mistakes during the revision stage.

When I wrote the first draft of my story, I used all the ideas I had written down from my brainstorming session and organized them into a story. As I wrote about each character, I did not worry about sentence structure or if each phrase made sense. Rather, my main goal was to get the content down on paper with the intent to revise it later. Because I did not stress about spelling and grammar, I was able to get all my ideas down on paper in the form of a story.
After completing the rough draft, the next step in the writing process is revision. It is important for children to realize that the first draft of their writing is simply a rough draft. They need to recognize why revising their writing is so important.

When revising their writing, it is often a good idea for students to share their work with their peers. Hearing the responses of others allows them to discover what is clear or unclear about their writing (Graves 1994). It also gives them an opportunity to hear ideas that another classmate may have that could add to their story.

In addition to hearing students' responses, children also enjoy sharing their drafts with the teacher. The job of the teacher is to help guide the children in their writing. Teachers can do this by asking the children questions such as, “What is the most important thing you are saying?” Also, teachers can help children expand on what they are saying by asking them to tell more about the topic (Calkins 1983). Suggestions from the teacher can benefit the students by giving them ideas of how to change their writing to make it more effective.

In order to revise my story, I went back through each character and tried to figure out if I had described him/her well. I also read through the story to determine if it made sense and if it fulfilled what I intended it to. As I read back through it, I discovered that some of the words I chose were confusing. So, I used a thesaurus to find other words that could take the place of the confusing ones.

I also used my family members’ opinions several times during my revision process. I asked each member of my family to read the story and give me suggestions. After reading it, they gave me suggestions about how to reword it and about things that I needed to work on. I also received feedback from the children at St. Mary’s. They gave me a lot of good suggestions and ideas about how to improve my book.

One important thing that children need to recognize about the revision process is that it may take a long time to complete. For me, revising my book took several months. I kept reading my book over and over again trying to find better ways to say things and bouncing my ideas off of other people.

The final stage in the writing process is publishing. This is the part of the process where children can share their finished product with others whether it be classmates, family members, teachers, or friends. There are several ways a child can publish his/her work. One such method is by putting it in the format of a book, as I did. When creating a book, children need to design a cover, record the text, and make illustrations. These books can then be placed in the classroom for other children to view.

Another method of publishing can be displaying the students’ work on a bulletin board entitled “Author of the Week” (Calkins 1983). This allows the children to see their classmates work. It also gives the students an opportunity to see how valuable their writing is since it is displayed for everyone to see and read.

A Writers’ Circle can be another avenue for children to share their work with others. A Writer’s Circle consists of groups of three or four students who take turns reading their work and hearing feedback and questions from others in the group (Calkins, 1983). It is important for children to hear feedback about their work because it allows them to hear their strengths and weaknesses in writing. Children can then use the information they gain from this experience when they write in the future.
For my story, I chose to publish it by putting it in the format of a book. The text is computer-generated in order to make it neat. I used a large font so that the text can be easily read. I also decided to only put one character on each page so the reader focuses on one character at a time. When it comes to illustrations, I decided to leave them up to the reader. The reader can draw pictures of what they think each character looks like. I decided to do this because I enjoyed the pictures the children at St. Mary’s had made after listening to the story.

Whatever the method children use to publish their work, this is an important step that completes the writing process. Publishing brings the writing process to a closure and emphasizes the purpose of writing each particular work.

When teaching children the writing process, it is important for them to understand the benefit of each step. If children understand the importance of the entire writing process, they are more likely to benefit from it. I think that by sharing my own experiences with the children that I can help them appreciate it more.
How I Can Use This Book in My Classroom

As a supporter of emergent literacy, I feel that children need to be given many wonderful opportunities to discover reading and writing. Because reading and writing go hand in hand, I feel that this book would be very useful in helping children discover what authors go through when creating a piece of work.

My first step would be to read my story to the class. After reading the story, I would share with my students the process that I went through as described above. My reasons for doing this are to instill in the children the realization that creating a good piece of writing requires much thought and careful revisions. Children need to realize that the first draft they complete is not going to be as well written as if they were to go back through the writing and make changes. Often times, children see the writing process as long and boring because there are so many steps involved. But, if children realize the importance of each step, the process will be more meaningful to them.

I must admit that before this project, I was not as involved in the writing process as I should be. I viewed it as just a long way of getting to the point. Now that I have really experienced the writing process, I am a full supporter of it. I have discovered for myself how valuable each step is and how it benefits you as a writer.

By allowing students to have the same experiences I did, my hope is that they too will see first-hand how the writing process works and how it can benefit them as writers. I feel that one way to do this would be to allow them to share their unfinished products with fellow classmates. Children can learn so much from each other and could gain a lot from hearing the opinions of their peers. This type of activity would give them ideas from their peers about any revisions or corrections they should make.

An author’s chair will definitely be found in my future classroom. This chair will be designated as the area where “budding” authors can present their finished or unfinished works to various numbers of students. By giving the students an opportunity to share their work, the teacher shows the students that their work is important and gives value and meaning to it.
Reflections

I feel that I have learned so much from this experience. One of the main things I have learned is how important the writing process is. Each author needs the opportunity to look through his/her work and revise it until it reflects his/her best work. I also discovered the importance and benefits of sharing your unfinished work with other people. This allows the writer to hear comments and suggestions and to consider those suggestions when revising.

I had a wonderful time creating my book. It was an amazing experience that has made me realize my interest in becoming a children’s author. Probably, the best part about it was hearing the first graders’ reactions to my book. I gained so much information from that 40 minutes that I was able to utilize when producing the final product. I thoroughly enjoyed this project and hope to continue writing children’s literature in the upcoming years.
Bibliography


Little Teachers

by Jonann Bredenkamp
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Dedicated to:
Courtney Bredenkamp, who has taught me many great lessons in life.
Jimmy sits in front of me at school. He wears a baseball cap everyday because he doesn't have any hair. Jimmy has leukemia. His hair fell out about a month ago because of the radiation treatment. He missed a lot of school while he was sick so I helped him catch up with his homework. Never once has Jimmy complained.

God sent Jimmy to teach me to be thankful.
Draw a picture of what you think Jimmy looks like.
Sally is the meanest bully in the school. One day, she pulled my pants down in front of the entire lunchroom. I was so embarrassed and mad. But, my mom told me not to hate her. That’s really hard to do.

God sent Sally to teach me how to forgive others.
Draw a picture of what you think Sally looks like.
I like to play with Jason at recess. We play tag and dodgeball. Jason and I like to have long talks at lunch, but we don’t use words. We use a special code called sign language. Jason talks to other people using his hands. My teacher taught the whole class how to say some things in sign language so now they can talk to Jason too.

God sent Jason to teach me how to use my hands to talk.
Draw a picture of what you think Jason looks like.
Katie is one of the funniest girls I have ever met. She is always smiling even though she can’t use her legs. She uses a wheelchair because her legs were deformed when she was born. The kids in my class take turns pushing her out to recess. Sometimes, Katie lets us ride in her wheelchair. It’s a lot of fun!

God sent Katie to teach me to be a helper.
Draw a picture of what you think Katie looks like.
Carl and I like to swing together at recess. We love having contests to see who can fly the highest. Carl loves finding patterns in the clouds and looking for birds in the sky. Sometimes, Carl and I like to go on long walks through the woods to see all the neat plants and animals.

God sent Carl to teach me to appreciate nature.
Draw a picture of what you think Carl looks like.
Courtney is my best friend. She plays basketball, soccer, and volleyball. Even though she is in sports, the other kids make fun of her. Courtney has a speech impediment. That means that she has a hard time saying some words. Sometimes, it is hard to understand what she is saying. I try to listen really hard, and it is easier for me to hear her.

God sent Courtney to teach me to be patient.
Draw a picture of what you think Courtney looks like.
Heather is the loudest girl I have ever met. I bet you can hear her voice all the way into outer space. It’s hard to do my homework in class because she is always talking. And she has the most annoying laugh! I guess Heather and I will probably never be friends, but I don’t hate her.

God sent Heather to teach me to be accepting.
Draw a picture of what you think Heather looks like.
The quietest boy in the class is Brian. He always sits in the corner by himself. Brian rarely ever says anything. One day, I went over to Brian and started talking to him. I found out that Brian has a lot of neat things to say and that he really needs a friend. He doesn’t talk a lot, but that’s okay with me. We still have a lot of fun together.

God sent Brian to teach me how to listen.
Draw a picture of what you think Brian looks like.
My friend Emily loves to paint. Her favorite things to paint are flowers. She says that they are beautiful. But, Emily doesn’t see things the way most people do. Emily is blind. So, she uses all her senses like touch, hearing, taste, and smell to help her discover new things.

God sent Emily to teach me to use the gifts God has given me.
Draw a picture of what you think Emily looks like.
Billy is the poorest kid in the whole school. One day, he
told me that his dad lost his job so his family doesn’t have very
much money. Billy comes to school wearing the same
raggedy clothes day after day. He never has any money for
lunch so I usually give him some of mine. He always
thanks me and promises to pay me back some day, but I tell
him that he doesn’t have to.

God sent Billy to teach me how to share.
Draw a picture of what you think Billy looks like.
Stephen and I are partners in Math. Sometimes, I get frustrated because it takes Stephen longer to do the problems than it does for me. That's because Stephen has a learning disability. The other kids make fun of him, and so do I. One day, I saw Stephen crying so I told him I was sorry. Instead of getting mad at me, Stephen treated me like a friend.

God sent Stephen to teach me to be kind.
Draw a picture of what you think Stephen looks like.
What do you think I look like?
Draw a picture of what you think I look like.
Actually, I have red hair, freckles, and glasses. Some of the kids call me tomato head and tease me because of my glasses. But, even tomato heads have feelings. My mom tells me that I am special just because I am me. I think she’s right!

She always says,

No matter the shape, the color, the size; We are all special in God’s eyes.

I think God sent me to teach others that they are special too!
The following pictures were drawn by Cathy Hahn and Norma Ruttan’s first grade classes after hearing me read "Little Teachers".
Courtney
Mary

Courtney
Billy
Jennifer  Tomato head
Chelsea

Tomato Head
Chase, Tomato head
Solley

Mr. Bully
Sally