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Building Inclusivity and Empathy Through Writers' Workshop

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Abstract

All children have the right to experience a safe and inclusive classroom that engages them in learning and advances equity. Writer's Workshop is particularly well-suited for creating a safe and inclusive space. Writer's Workshop encourages children to share their own stories and listen to, learn about, and develop empathy for others. This instructional strategy can also encourage conversation about important social issues in local communities and the broader world. This article explains specific approaches that can be used within the Writer's Workshop framework to examine assumptions, use inclusive language, and practice respectful interactions.

Teaser Text

Teachers can use Writer's Workshop to create a safe and inclusive space that empowers all children to learn about themselves and develop respect and empathy for their peers.

Using Writer's Workshop to Create a Safe and Inclusive Classroom

Mr. Jackson is a first-grade teacher of 22 racially, linguistically, and economically diverse children. He is committed to providing a classroom space that encourages inclusivity and empathy. His instruction challenges his students to consider social issues in ways that are culturally relevant and builds a “communal learning environment” (Gay, 2001, p. 110). Mr. Jackson’s instructional strategies are based on culturally relevant pedagogy which is described as a “pedagogy of opposition...specifically committed to collective, not merely individual empowerment” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 160). Culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on students experiencing academic success while developing cultural competence and a critical lens to challenge society’s status quo (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Mr. Jackson uses Writer’s Workshop each day for his students to discuss and write about issues such as equity, climate change, race, gender, language, and immigration. Writer’s Workshop is a framework that was developed by writing teachers and researchers (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983) and has been used for decades in early childhood classrooms. Writer’s Workshop includes a short minilesson, time for independent writing and teacher conferencing, and sharing. It is well-suited for creating a safe and inclusive space to examine social issues in elementary classrooms because the framework allows for opportunities for students to build self-awareness, experience different points of view, and experiment with how their writing and actions affect others. These opportunities can be differentiated based upon the age of the children, the genre being studied, and the complexity of the social issues being addressed.

Students can increase their self-awareness during Writer’s Workshop through researching topics of their choice, exploring their families’ histories and using their primary languages to

communicate. During all parts of the workshop, children can listen to the ideas and experiences of their teacher and peers, which encourages perspective-taking and understanding. There are also opportunities for teachers to set up comfortable and safe spaces for independent writing and sharing so that children can explore how their writing impacts others.

All children have the right to experience a safe and inclusive classroom like the one Mr. Jackson provides, which engages students in learning and advances equity. Early learning experiences should “embrace diversity and full inclusion as strengths, uphold fundamental principles of fairness and justice, and work to eliminate structural inequities that limit equitable learning opportunities” (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2019, p. 1). Mr. Jackson enacts these values by challenging his own assumptions or biases, using inclusive language, and using role play and student input to establish rules for respectful interactions.

It is not surprising that many educators may feel unprepared to discuss social issues, like race and gender equity, in their classrooms (Vittrup, 2016), due to lack of training and experience addressing critical issues in their teacher education programs. Yet, given the political and cultural climate, it is vitally important for teachers to create spaces for children to take up these topics (Poon, 2017; Cole & Verwayne, 2018) in developmentally appropriate ways.

Therefore, the purpose of this Teaching Tip is to describe how teachers can intentionally design their Writer’s Workshop to represent diverse perspectives, explore important social issues related to fairness and justice, and help children develop empathy for others. In the sections below, we describe how Mr. Jackson uses Writer’s Workshop to develop an inclusive space for his students to discuss issues that are important to them.

Using Mentor Texts in Minilessons

Mr. Jackson intentionally models writing about personal experiences that include references to varying genders, cultures, family structures, and races during minilessons. He is intentional in selecting mentor texts where children can see themselves in the characters and where they can see experiences of others (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014). Rudine Sims Bishop (2015) posits that literature can help children see their own lives and experiences within the greater context of society if they can find themselves reflected in the books they read. She points out that children from dominant social groups benefit from experiencing texts about others and argues that books can “introduce readers to the history and traditions that are important to any one cultural group, and which invite comparisons to their own” (n.p.).

Therefore, selecting mentor texts that represent diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic perspectives presented in authorship and storyline is important. For example, Mr. Jackson uses Donald Crew’s *Shortcut* as a mentor text for teaching memoir writing. In *Shortcut*, a Black man tells a story from his childhood when he and his friends got stuck on train tracks and hear a train coming. During his minilesson, Mr. Jackson highlights how we all have important stories to tell and models how language and word choice influence voice in writing. He writes his own memoir in front of the class, which tells the story of how his grandmother shared her love of music with him. These personal accounts are relatable for many of Mr. Jackson’s students as they learn to retell their own stories.

Similarly, when Mr. Jackson teaches narrative writing, he uses *The Journey* by Francesca Sanna, which tells the story of a family who is forced to leave their home because of war, and *My Papi Has a Motorcycle* by Isabel Quintero, a story about a changing community that includes bilingualism. He also uses the story, *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts, to explore challenges

faced by families making tough decisions between wants and needs due to their socioeconomic status. During minilessons using these books, Mr. Jackson asks children to consider using their families' stories and language in their writing and encourages empathy by asking questions like, "How do you think the character feels? How does the author convey emotion in the story? How does the story make you feel?"

Mr. Jackson purposefully selects mentor texts when teaching different genres. For example, when the children are writing poetry, Mr. Jackson uses *I Remember: Poems and Pictures of Heritage*, which is a collection of poems written by a diverse group of authors. When Mr. Jackson is intentional about selecting texts that have characters with diverse racial identities, ethnic backgrounds, and storylines, he provides children with opportunities to learn about themselves and others that go beyond "single stories" (Adiche, 2009; Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

When teachers select mentor texts, they can also choose texts that highlight historically underrepresented current and historical figures in social movements and important events. For example, *Tiny Stitches: The Life of Medical Pioneer Vivien Thomas* by Gwendolyn Hooks tells the story of Vivien Thomas, who was not allowed to attend medical school in the 1930s. Despite this setback, Thomas helped to develop a new surgical technique for open-heart surgery, but he was not given credit for his contributions. This book could be used as a mentor text for informational writing presented in narrative form, while simultaneously providing a context for discussing racial discrimination.

Mr. Jackson selects mentor texts that can simultaneously teach about writing and the stories of marginalized people and events that are often left out of mainstream curriculum materials. When Mr. Jackson conferences with his students, he is able to have further

conversations about history with children. For example, when one of his students was writing an informational text about farming, Mr. Jackson shared information about George Washington Carver's contribution to farming and Frederick McKinley Jones' invention of the refrigerated truck.

Additionally, teachers can intentionally select narratives that have characters that challenge systems and use a range of discourses and dialects. For example, Mr. Jackson uses *Yesterday I Had the Blues* by Jeron Ashford Frame to highlight non-standard dialects and the beauty of using different ways of speaking in written text. Mr. Jackson then uses the line from the story, "Daddy Says He Got the Grays," to have a discussion about the author's meaning and encourage the children to discuss what has given them the grays. This discussion serves as an opening to teach about language use and discuss feelings in ways that build community.

Discussing Students' Experiences During Conferencing

Following the minilesson in Writer's Workshop, students are invited to write independently, while the teacher conducts one-on-one conferences to assist the children with their writing. During this time, Mr. Jackson provides various avenues for students to record their thoughts, such as creating graphic organizers, audio recordings, digital storytellings, and physical models of their storylines using supplies like blocks, markers, and clay. In addition, he is intentional in creating a neutral space where power lines are balanced between the students and teacher. For example, instead of asking students to come to his desk for a conference, he rotates around the room, kneeling at his students' desks in order to engage in authentic conversations without interrupting their writing process.

Mr. Jackson also uses conferencing as a time to help children examine their assumptions by asking non-threatening questions. When he was conferencing with Jimmy about his story

featuring community helpers, he asked him if he thought females could also be doctors in his community and if men could be school nurses, after noticing the gender stereotypes depicted in his illustrations.

Conferencing can also be used to develop a strong sense of community by discussing common links in students' stories. Mr. Jackson acknowledges commonalities in his students' stories surrounding shared experiences such as adopting a pet or cooking a favorite meal. When he shared a personal story with Luis about visiting his grandmother in the hospital, Luis was eager to tell Mr. Jackson about the time he visited his new baby brother in the hospital. In turn, he was inspired to write about this experience during independent writing time.

Finally, conferencing can provide a safe space for discussion, especially for children who do not prefer to share their writing with a large group. Mr. Jackson reserves judgement when listening to his students' stories and asks open-ended questions to encourage conversation. He provides a sign-up sheet that allows children to choose when they want to share with the whole class (if at all) and various other sharing opportunities such as partner and small group sharing which can be less intimidating.

Sharing Writing to Increase Understanding of Others

When children share their writing with others, they learn that their writing has a purpose and an audience (Hurst, Scales, Frecks, & Lewis, 2011). They learn that writing contributes to the development of a positive classroom community and they develop empathy for one another (Barone, 2013).

The children in Mr. Jackson's class share their writing daily. During a personal narrative unit focused on diverse cultural and linguistic experiences, Mr. Jackson shared his own story of being told he was adopted from Guatemala. Two of his students shared their parents'

immigration stories and their experiences as bilingual learners, which encouraged understanding and empathy. Another student wrote a narrative about three generations in his family and the careers they had chosen in the health field. Families were invited to contribute photographs to accompany their children's writing and encouraged to share their rich family histories with their children during this unit, which allowed the children to learn more about each other including their families, interests, languages, cultures, etc. To culminate the study, families were invited to celebrate their children's writing at an Author's Tea after the personal narratives had been published, which created a space for listening and learning.

Mr. Jackson also uses digital platforms, like his classroom blog, to share children's writing. When children write multimedia projects using tools like Adobe Spark, iMovie, or Storykit, Mr. Jackson provides them with opportunities to share their work with a wider audience and, in some cases, to learn from others. For example, when students researched and wrote about the influence of climate change on animals in their region, they used Twitter to share their findings with local experts. Using digital platforms to share writing gives children an authentic reason for writing and provides opportunities to make connections with people in different geographic regions. These experiences help build relationships and develop empathy for people beyond the school walls.

Having an authentic audience can also serve as a catalyst for change related to specific issues, which can be both positive for the community and empowering for the children. For example, when Mr. Jackson invited his students to research environmentalism and create a position statement to share with other classes, he noticed an increase in writing motivation. His students started by creating informational pamphlets about improving the recycling efforts at their school, but soon advanced to reminding others at lunch which items were recyclable. The

result was shared excitement throughout the school about making a difference through small changes in their daily habits. Parents reported the children's new habits carried over at home with increased recycling and through encouraging other environmentally-friendly family practices.

Discussion

Children come to school with diverse experiences, ideas, and knowledge of the world, which are shaped by their race, language, gender, and ethnicity. Effective teachers use a variety of instructional approaches to celebrate the diversity of children, including what they already know and can do (International Literacy Association, 2018). The structure of Writer's Workshop provides multiple opportunities for children to share their own ideas and experiences as they also listen to others' perspectives and consider the impact they can make with their writing and actions.

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