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Writing Buddies: Developing Peer Support to Differentiate Instruction

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A new school year had begun at King Elementary School in Ann Arbor and we discussed our concerns with each other about the writing curriculum. Specifically, we initiated conversations regarding our teaching styles and objectives for guiding our students to learn, particularly to develop as young writers (kindergarteners in Neha's class and fifth graders in Jeff's). As educators, we wondered how we could differentiate writing instruction more efficiently to meet the wide range of social and academic needs for our students, within and across grade levels.

How could we engage our students as writers? How could we provide one-on-one or small-group, peer support for students who struggle, or who are consistently growing, or those who highly achieve? How could we promote community in our classrooms and strengthen social skills that would help students achieve academically?

Contemplating these questions through discussions around the concept of peer support, we discovered viable solutions and experienced some "ah-ha" moments. We sought to try something new and exciting by supporting our students as writers and as peers across grade levels. We wanted to make sure our students were engaged in learning while building their social and academic skills, and we turned toward Jeff's fifth grade students and their potential capacity to mentor and support Neha's kindergarteners. After some intense collaborative planning between us during the first week of school, Writing Buddies was born, a general approach

supported by research, and one that we discovered works.

Brief Review of Representative Literature

Research shows that peer support is an effective method to enhance achievement (Bernard), and it can provide social and emotional support through the process of writing. For example, Damon and Phelps present an overview of the value, or potential value, of peer interaction (see also Kalkowski), including the social and academic possibilities:

Despite popular suspicions about the dangers that peer pressure poses for youth, studies have left little doubt that peer relations can greatly benefit children's social and intellectual development. The case for children's peer relations has been made repeatedly and conclusively in developmental theory and research...Repeated studies have shown that peer interaction is conducive, perhaps even essential, to a host of important early achievements: children's understanding of fairness, their self-esteem, their proclivities toward sharing and kindness, their mastery of symbolic expression, their acquisition of role-taking and communication skills, and their development of creative and critical thinking. (135)

Therefore, peer interaction facilitates students' development in multiple facets of whole child development, and, for our purposes, as writers and as cross-grade peers (also see Rekrut; Webb; Hedin).

Pairing and Preparing the Students to Become Writing Buddies

Prior to our students meeting each other, we considered a range of factors in pairing the students, e.g., reading ability, behavior, and personality. We matched "low-achieving" kindergarten readers with "high-achieving" fifth graders and "high-achieving" kindergarten readers with "low achieving" fifth graders. Additionally, we attempted to match students with similar interests and to avoid any known potential

behavioral issues or problems. We planned to provide consistent time for Writing Buddies one day per week, and we wanted to ensure that during this thirty-minute interaction students were working and learning how to meet the objectives for that day. Furthermore, we wanted Jeff's fifth grade students to enter Neha's kindergarten class prepared with specific instructions on how to scaffold learning for their buddies (Foot); and we planned to teach the students about the writing process through modeling it in our classrooms.

Other questions emerged from these plans and the core idea of cross-grade peer interactions. How should we consider gender when forming pairs? How should we address students who may be fearful of this process? How could we best pair the children to achieve the most effective support and experience? And how would we assess the development of the approach and of our students?

Objectives and Strategies

As we jumped into Writing Buddies, the key to our success was meeting regularly about the weekly objectives. We discussed strategies that would help the kindergarteners with their writing, e.g., spacing and punctuation, and how to guide the fifth graders to support the implantations of these strategies. Each session was structured to coincide with the Lucy Calkins K-5 Units of Study, which, at the kindergarten level, is primarily focused on launching writers' workshop and small moments in writing. The main focus was to support the kindergarteners during the year with particular writing objectives, and the following is a representative list.

- Spacing
- Punctuation
- Capital and lower case letters
- Brainstorming an idea
- Drawing pictures to represent the story
- Sounding out words
- Re-reading sentences
- Revising and editing work
- Reflection

Most kindergarteners begin the year with little prior writing experience; thus, their confidence in writing is often low. Adding peer support, we theorized, would provide kindergarten students with assistance in meeting

these objectives, particularly brainstorming, drawing, sequencing, sentence structure, confidence, spelling, details, and social skills.

The Value of Writing Buddies: What We Found

As the year progressed, we collected writing samples weekly to analyze growth of students in both classes. As we analyzed the data, the rationale for spending time with peer support was warranted. Not only were the kindergarteners reaching the objectives bulleted above, the fifth graders improved as writers as well. Throughout the year, the fifth graders particularly demonstrated progress in their knowledge of revising and editing, actions they engaged in with the writing of their younger peers. By working with the kindergarteners, they gained more confidence with social interactions; and they were making a positive impact by helping kindergarteners develop ideas, conventions and confidence as writers. This, in turn, appeared to inspire the fifth graders to fully utilize their "special time" with their buddies, evidenced by their written reflections, teacher observations of on-task behavior and apparent ownership and responsibility of their role in the development of their partners.

Reflecting on the past school year, we further discovered that reading and responding to writing of younger students helped the fifth graders to become proficient writers and to discover value in mentoring and develop reflection skills. In addition, they strengthened their editing and revision abilities, and they unexpectedly learned other content through these interactions. For example, Jeff observed that many of his fifth graders had learned word families that they had not previously recognized. Writing Buddies also provided community connection across grade levels, which in turn, supported leadership roles of the fifth graders.

We also learned the value of some of the logistics that supported all of our efforts. For example, in addition to providing students with ample writing opportunities and materials (pencils, pens, double lined paper, crayons), we found that a date stamp aided in chronologically organizing data, allowing us to track growth as the year progressed. Also, technology played a vital role in aiding in student engagement, particularly when reading or talking to the whole group. For example, we incorporated a sound system to ensure that all students could be clearly heard while sharing with the

whole group, and we used a projector to remind students of daily objectives. In the future, we plan to use the ELMO (an overhead projector with a camera that reflects exactly what is beneath it) as a tool for sharing student samples and for student read-alouds.

Plans for the Coming Year

Next year, we plan to continue the program and guide student writers to experiment with additional genres (e.g., personal narratives, timelines, and descriptive writing) and interactive writing. A multitude of ways exists to extend learning opportunities beyond “buddy time, and we will continue to explore some of them. The fifth graders, for example, could enhance their understanding of the writing process through the following practices:

- Analyzing their writing buddy’s work
- Researching topics the buddy chose
- Pre-writing about selected topics
- Drafting (outlining or visual representations)
- Writing responses to their buddy’s writing
- Re-writing stories with student’s own perspective
- Revising their buddy’s writing
- Engaging in pen-pal exchanges (possible foreign language to support cross-curricular learning)
- Writing in reflection journals

Conclusion

Overall, Writing Buddies met the needs of both sets of students. For the kindergartners, the benefits included the development of emergent writing skills, one-on-one differentiation, and guided practice. For the fifth graders, the benefits were realized in the development of reflective writing, leadership and social interaction skills, and in the recognition of their personal writing process. Mutual areas of growth came in the following ways: building academic skills, developing socially, improving self-esteem as peers and as writers, and building community within and across classrooms. All in all, Writing Buddies was an excellent way for us to help students with aspects of developing writing strategies and skills; additionally, we showed students that writing is both a social process and fun!

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Web Resources

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About the Authors

Neha Shah (shahn@aaps.k12.mi.us) is in her fourth year of teaching Kindergarten in the Ann Arbor Public School District. Her interests involve traveling, animals, and sports. She loves to recycle, hug trees, and help the environment. She aspires to work toward global education to make the world a better place to live.

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