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# Storytelling Time

by Leah Porter

**M**y name is Leah Porter. Over the last nine years I have been a kindergarten teacher, building interventionist, Reading Recovery teacher, and grade level leader in Holt Public Schools.

As an educator, I am pulled in so many different directions that I often find it very difficult to fit in all the content in a meaningful and purposeful way. There are many components of curriculum and teaching that I want to enhance in order to support the diverse learners in my classroom. I have to pick and choose what and where I will devote my time, and that task is very complex! I strive to stretch and challenge my thinking each year, and focus on a particular goal in a specific content area that will enhance learning for all students. This can be a challenging task. My inclination is to want to fix everything all at once, but working in one goal area allows me to dedicate true focus, which allows real change to occur. This is even more powerful when working with a team of colleagues who provide different perspectives and ideas.

My kindergarten grade-level team was growing increasingly concerned over the lack of idea development that we saw in our students' writing. As part of our curriculum, students were expected to write about a different topic each day, and it seemed that student engagement and stamina in daily writing tasks was minimal. We wondered why that was occurring.

In our examination of student writing, our team found that many of our students could create and develop sentences on a topic, but they were simplistic, lacking details and voice. It seemed to be a challenge for many of the students to bring ideas from pre-writing discussions into their compositions during independent writing time. Through our classroom observations, we noticed that when they completed the task, they showed

no desire to improve what they had written, which resulted in decreased engagement and behavior issues. In retrospect I realize that, even as an adult, I find it difficult to write on demand. Certainly, children would have difficulty with this as well. From this discussion we posed two questions: How can we engage students in their writing and help them develop their ideas? How can we build stamina over a sustained period of writing time?

We began to devise a strategic and specific plan to give students time to process and plan their writing. Over the course of the school year, my grade level colleagues, Pam Wilson, Amy Mondoskin, and I created a homework component to our comprehensive reading program that correlated with the writing portion of our curriculum. We called it "Storytelling Time" and the idea was simple: to have parents guide their student through planning for an upcoming writing topic through oral storytelling and drawing. We would preview these homework assignments with our class beforehand to get the kids excited about this special family task. Each Friday, we sent home a new topic with guiding questions to help families have a conversation with their students. This conversation would provide scaffolding through the guiding questions to support students in orally telling their stories at home. After the students had told their stories orally, we asked families to draw representations of these stories and return them to school.

On the "storytelling time" writing day, the teacher would first model with a student how to use the drawings to orally tell their stories to a classmate. Then each student would have the opportunity to practice doing this with a partner. After this the students would take their pictures, glue them to their writing paper, and devote their entire writing time to the development of their

story. Having multiple opportunities to share their stories orally would help students be better prepared for writing, enabling them to get to work right away and remain engaged throughout the independent writing time.

For students who did not complete this work at home, it would be important for the teacher or a volunteer to sit down with those students and help them develop an oral story before classroom writing time. It would be critical for each student to have that thinking time before the writing lesson that week.

The results were incredible. Student engagement on these writing days was high. The class was excited for writing, and to share the stories they had developed at home. Since students had been given time to develop their ideas through multiple oral conversations, both at home and at school, each student was able to devote his/her writing time in class to the details of the idea, and each one created special and unique stories.

While our goal was to develop student engagement in writing, we got the added benefit of engaging families as well. Families of our students saw the power and impact that these homework assignments had on their students' learning, and many of them made this assignment a priority each week. At the end of the year we felt it was

important to celebrate with a grade level family potluck, because without the support of families, this project would not have been successful. We ate, socialized, and students' shared their writing with their families. It was a special evening and made us appreciate the powerful effect that collaboration can have on student growth.

Developing "Storytelling Time" altered the way I teach writing and story development. While I could not use the storytelling time structure for each writing task, I saw that many of the strategies and tools I taught my students carried over to other writing assignments in the classroom. They became better storytellers, and began to apply that to other writing tasks in the classroom. Motivation was increased due to the greater confidence they had as writers. "Storytelling Time" was, and continues to be, a powerful structure that has made a substantial difference in the writing development of my kindergarten students, and I encourage other teachers to use this approach to develop their own students' oral language and engagement.

*Leah Porter is a kindergarten teacher at Wilcox Elementary School in Holt, Michigan. You can contact her by e-mail at: [ljporter@hpsk12.net](mailto:ljporter@hpsk12.net).*

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