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Kids as Writers: The Power of Publishing

Mary Dekker

The principal escorted Bobby back to his seat, looked at me with a smirk, and motioned for me to come into the hall. I wondered what it could be this time. During a long discussion about a problem Bobby was having, he told the principal that he might as well quit school. When the principal asked him to consider how he would ever get a job if as a third grader he quit school, Bobby informed him that he was quite sure he could quit at this point and write and publish his own children's books. He had lots of ideas and was a good writer.

While, of course, the principal and I did not dismiss Bobby's problem, we couldn't help feeling good about Bobby's self-assessment. As a teacher who followed her second grade students to third grade, I knew how far Bobby had come. He thought of himself as a writer. A good one. While I don't think all of my students feel as strongly as Bobby about their writing abilities, I do know that most of them feel like writers. Even though I can't tell you this has been an easy thing to achieve, I have hit upon a set of circumstances that work year after year.

Classroom Environment: The Writers' Workshop

Like many other writing teachers in elementary and secondary schools, I run a writers' workshop. In my second or third grade classroom

my students are given time to generate topics, draft pieces of writing, revise, edit, and publish. The overall framework for our writing time is working toward a publication. The time varies depending on students' needs and the type of publication, but usually we work in a three to four week time frame. It begins with a day or two of generating topics. Students are then given a couple of weeks to draft pieces. They may spend the entire time drafting and revising one piece of writing, or they may draft and revise several pieces. Then the week prior to a publication is spent doing the final revisions and editing the pieces.

The students write in an environment that is supportive in many ways. They are given time four to five days a week to write. They are given time to share their writing with partners, small groups, and the whole class if they wish. They write for a variety of purposes including to entertain, inform, and persuade, and for a variety of authentic audiences including their classmates, other classes, parents, penpals, and the general public. I provide all the care and support that I know how, trusting that all my students will become writers.

Over the past eight years I have discovered several successful methods of publication which are outlined below.

Class Magazines

I begin to treat the students as writers from the very first days of second grade. We begin by writing a magazine, a classroom collection of writing, called "The People of Room 6." Each student chooses a partner. We negotiate the topics we will write about for each person. Usually we write about family, pets, and things the person likes to do. I lead the students through a notetaking exercise where they ask their partners for information and then record the answers. From there I model how to use notes to write an article. After the articles are written, I conference with each student and his/her partner. When I type up the articles in our magazine collection, each student receives a copy. One writing period is used for sharing our published pieces by reading them to partners and other students in the room. The magazines are then displayed for our first open house. An additional couple of copies are kept on hand in the room for the students to pick up and read as the year goes on, as well as to display later in the year when people visit our room.

Magazines have become a common type of publishing in my classroom. We usually publish four to five per year. Other types of magazines include: themed issues for the holidays (Halloween, Thanksgiving, etc.), and themed issues to coincide with the science curriculum (dinosaurs, endangered species, The Earth, etc.). An issue might include stories, articles, poems, shape poems (poems written around a particular shape), tongue twisters, and riddles. The students also enjoy designing covers for the magazine.

Whenever we publish a magazine, the students receive personal copies and have one writing period to share their pieces with classroom friends and any adults who have been invited.

Individual Bound Books

After the students have been published in our first magazine, "The People of Room 6," we embark on another type of publishing—the individual bound book. Most students write personal narratives or fantasy stories. Common topics include families, relatives, pets, sports, or trips as well as superheroes and fairy tales. Some students often write a retelling of a favorite story or

movie like *The Lion King* or *Aladdin*. Others enjoy writing informational pieces about animals, 4-H projects, the solar system, or other varied areas of interest.

The students are given a blank assembled book. The books have hard covers and several plain white sheets inside. Parents help assemble the books during the year using mat board (the material used for framing pictures). This creates a durable, bound book which we often refer to as "our hardcover books." The students arrange their text, create illustrations, write a dedication, and design their covers. Each book, equipped with its own library card, then becomes a part of our classroom library. The students sign the library card each time they read a classmate's book. It is not uncommon to see students find their own book to check how many people have read it. The student gets the message—I am a writer!

During most years, each student publishes three to four books. The books are displayed during any open house for parents and other guests to see.

Published Writing In Science

Content area writing takes several forms. In addition to the themed magazines mentioned previously, most students love to write and perform plays along science curricular themes. For example, when we study dinosaurs the students write a script as if they are a particular dinosaur. Although the plays and scenery could be far more elaborate, I have had great success with stick puppets the children make, manipulated from behind an overturned classroom table adorned with a scene the students designed. The plays can be performed in the classroom for classmates, other classes can be invited in, or the plays can be videotaped to show parents, penpals, or other interested groups.

Two other types of content area writing, display writing and pamphlets, have been done in conjunction with classroom museums. When my second graders make a dinosaur museum the room is filled with murals and displays about dinosaurs. For example, next to a mural of the Jurassic Period a student writes facts about the

period and the dinosaurs that lived at this time. One year two boys did a display entitled, "Weapons and Armor." They drew and made models of claws, spikes, tails, and teeth and wrote text to explain their exhibit.

Our classroom museums are open to other classrooms and parents for visits. Some students enjoy locating information and then writing interesting facts in the form of a pamphlet to hand out to visitors. An example of pamphlet topics is one on amazing facts: the longest dinosaur, the shortest, the biggest egg, the smallest egg, etc. Information from a pamphlet on the horned dinosaurs included a list of dinosaurs with horns, the number of horns they had, and the relative size of the dinosaurs.

Newsletters And Newspapers

The students write some of the articles for our weekly newsletter designed to keep parents informed about classroom activities. The students write about special activities like hikes to the pond as well as about our regular classroom routines like doing the daily calendar activities.

As the students write stories for individual bound books and for themed magazines, I often send a copy of each story to a local newspaper that publishes student writing. It is exciting for the students to see their stories in the newspaper!

Penpals

The final method of publication is writing penpal letters. Usually the penpals are another second or third grade class in a nearby town. Penpal letters are written about once a month. Often there is a picnic at the end of the year in which the students meet their penpals. This past year I had a penpal exchange with high school students, and several years ago we exchanged letters with soldiers in the Persian Gulf War.

The penpal letter exchange is always a popular activity. The students enjoy telling another person about themselves and they like receiving letters. Again the student gets the message—I am a writer!

Making It Your Own

When I give workshop presentations about publishing student writing, teachers often ask questions like these: what do you do with students who don't know what to write about? What do you do with students who write and won't revise? What do you do with the reluctant ones—the kids who just don't want to write? I don't pretend to have all the answers, but I do relate to the audience what I have found to be true. It's a complex set of circumstances that has something to do with the environment of the writers' workshop I described earlier and a variety of opportunities for publication. Students who publish often feel like Bobby—they're writers! As writers they think about writing even when they are not writing. They have lots of ideas of their own and can talk to peers, who are also writers, when they run into trouble. Most students are willing to revise because they know their work will be read by others, and they want it to be good.

Sometimes during presentations teachers voice other concerns. They ask: do you do all the typing? Do you have computers in your room? Do you have a lot of parent volunteers? At this point the participants have seen my students' published writing and have entertained the idea that publishing in their classrooms may make a big difference in the writing their students do. As teachers ask these questions, I see the looks on their faces. The looks say, "I am already taxed beyond belief. How can I do it?"

My answer is make this process your own. Make it work for you in a way that makes sense. Maybe you will start by publishing one magazine each marking period. Or maybe your publishing will include writing to penpals and integrating writing into other curricular areas. Consider these ideas, too. Who are some people you might call in for help? Are there parents who would help with editing conferences or with typing? Are their older students in your building or a local high school who could help? Are there education students at a nearby college who might be willing to help you?

Closely related to the issue of calling in helpers is how to make publication less work from the beginning. For some simpler but authentic ways of publishing, consider having students audiotape their pieces. These could be shared with

other classes, over the PA, with penpals, at conferences, etc. Students could copy their final drafts themselves and prepare their manuscripts to be displayed in the hall. A wall outside a classroom filled with student writing sends a powerful message to all who walk by—this room is full of writers! Perhaps you can find another teacher in your building who would like to share pieces of writing at regular intervals. For other publishing ideas Nancie Atwell has detailed lists in *In the Middle* and *Coming to Know*.

This past summer during a writing project, I noticed that as I talked to a colleague about how I structured my writers' workshop to work toward some type of publication, it opened up a number of possibilities. I had said that I tried but couldn't handle having some students publishing while others were at other points in the writing process. I explained how we moved toward publication, how students did do writing that was never published since they made choices on what to publish, and that all students were expected to publish when the time came. That is, they had to have the required writing piece for publication whether it be an individual book, an article or story for our magazine, or a penpal letter. My colleague could see how this might work. You may be reading this and seeing the same thing. Or, you might be thinking this will never work. The point

is, everyone has to find what is workable for him or her and the students he or she is working with that year. What has worked for Nancie Atwell or Lucy Calkins may not work for you or me—or it might. There's a lot of trial and error involved.

Conclusion

Last year when I followed my second graders to third grade I thought I needed to begin our second year of writing slowly with warm-up activities—a day or so of thinking about how to choose topics. The students complained immediately. After one boy asked, "Hey, when are we going to write?" a barrage of questions followed. Are we going to publish books? Will we do some magazines? Will we have penpals? They were writers back in their writing environment, and they were ready to write.

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