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Israel's Journey: Using Sketch-to-Stretch to Make Meaning with Literature

Judith Cova Kelly and Cheryl Yocum

A snow day!! Yeah!! We'll sleep in. We'll read a good book. We'll watch an old movie. Right?! Wrong! No, instead we took advantage of the gift of time and braved the weather to prepare for a novel unit on *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor. We came together armed with novel study guides and a video tape version of the book. We were about to plan the best novel study ever!!

What really happened was actually much different and more meaningful than we had anticipated. We never looked at the guides again and allowed one strategy to lead us and our students along the way. By doing this, we embarked on a learning journey that altered all of our paths, none more than that of a learning disabled student named Israel.

A Traveler

Israel was a handsome, friendly 12-year-old male with a great sense of humor which he shared with his classmates. His learning disability was identified in the area of written expression. The mechanics of writing, including syntax, were difficult for him, and he was very aware of this. During writing conferences throughout the year, he openly admitted that writing was hard, and deciphering what he wrote was difficult for us.

Israel was, however, a very talented artist. He often drew during class. One of his first writers'

workshop projects was a comic book containing original cartoon characters. Other members of the class readily asked him for help with their illustrations.

He was never asked by others for assistance on revisions, though. As far as his role within the classroom was concerned, he took the part of a silent participant. He seldom volunteered during group discussions. He was definitely socially accepted by his peers, but academically he seemed to take a back seat within the classroom schema.

Our Itinerary

Our plan was to co-teach one hour a day three times a week for five weeks. We, along with the students, would read, journal, and discuss daily.

The students were to write as if they were Cassie, the main character. We encouraged them to go beyond retelling by reacting and responding. We divided the journals in half randomly and responded to them every night. We, in our responses, always modeled the type of journal entry for which we were looking.

During our novel study, Israel never complained about or avoided journaling. Even though writing was difficult for him, he completed the assigned task. However, in writers' workshop when given a choice, he did not choose to write narrative or expository text. He instead chose a format which required much less writing.

Israel's entries were retellings, but he usually made at least one personal connection. Because of his disability, his entries were difficult to read. We were, however, able to decipher his work and respond appropriately, hoping our language would serve as a model for him. His responses seemed to be adequate in quality. We never found them to be outstanding, but they were not the weakest in the class either.

Dear Diry

*I'm get n
scraed . about the brunner's [burners]
I aver heard momy talk to one
of her frends I hear everything there is
to know about them. Oh a pape [papa] came
yesterday and broug one of his frend's that got
fridered [fired] becues of a fight with some
white fokes. He's bigger that pape I useto
thin[k] pape was [big] but he looks like pea.
I was happy to see papae then he had to back.
to work. Then he came to Mr. Mrachester
[Morrison]
live with us. I know about him but
he is spoest to help us out. I hope nothing
bad happes to us.*

Sinserly

Cassie Lowgone

After the eighth journal entry, we felt we had modeled sufficiently what we were looking for in responses and wanted to vary our activities, so we invited the students to dialogue in writing. We had them write for ten minutes, trade journals and respond for five minutes, and trade back again. By doing this we expanded the audience of the children who chose not to share aloud in class; this group included Israel. The children who traded with him were able to read, comprehend, and respond to his entries, as we were. His writing problems did not affect his ability to communicate with his peers. They were able to dialogue on paper with no apparent problems.

Dec/24/94

Dear Diry

*I think that
was a very good way why*

*thay hadly [handled] the proble , [problem] But
T.J.*

Is still making fun of stace.

*I am realy tamted [tempted] to get in a fight
with "Miss" Iellan Jen*

*and T.J. . I's [It's] almost chrime [Christmas]
dady*

*came mama made a gaet [great] meal
today*

Cassie

Langon

Are you sure you want to mess

with T.J. or Liellian

*Jean? What are your
plans?*

to bet [beat] there but's

*if papa say's I can. But I don't think so that he
would let me don that*

Terry

The quality of dialogue written by the class was outstanding. If the entry was a retelling, the responder questioned and pulled the writer into deeper thinking. Israel had reminded the writer to look at the situation from the character's point of view, to use Israel's words, "Put your self in his shoes." Israel also showed insight into T.J.'s persuasive nature that it appeared the writer had missed.

Ya it ws pretty

dump for Stacey to

do that. I would

*never fall for a stunt like that. I would of never
gave him the jacket.*

cassie

do you know that for

a fact ? you know his

realy sily [sly] maybe he can

ues [use] perprues [pressure] on you

his good at that his

been doing ti for yea [years]

Put your self

in he's shoes

Yes. I do know

it was dumb

for him to do that

A Detour

About half-way through the novel, we wanted to talk to the class about options for the final

project so they could be thinking about them while they completed the book. We had been hearing about multiple ways of making meaning and wanted to try these ideas with the students. We felt they should have the choice of using a different sign system, such as art, music, or drama, for the final project. We came across an article that described an approach called "Sketch-to-Stretch." In this article, Phyllis Whitin defined the strategy Sketch-to-Stretch "as creating a visual representation of colors, lines, symbols, and shapes to convey one's understanding of conflict, character, theme, or feelings in a piece of literature." Whitin went on to say she had begun "to see exciting potential for exploring and constructing multiple interpretations of text." We wondered if the students could represent their thoughts and reactions to the novel as colored symbols rather than words. They had already done such a good job in their written responses that we felt they could. We had not attempted transmediation, moving from one sign system to another, and were excited to give it a go. On the following Monday, we read as usual and then explained Sketch-to-Stretch. We told the class they had 10 minutes to draw a symbol using lines and colors that expressed the feelings, mood, or events that had taken place in the day's reading. They then had five minutes to write an explanation of their symbols in their journals.

Israel was the second child to volunteer to share his symbol and explanation with the class. We were both surprised by this because he had not shared his journal entries aloud before. His symbol was black and amoebae shaped. Israel explained the whites had an edge over the blacks in the book. This symbol showed the blacks had no edge (corners). The class responded positively to all of the symbols shared, but they seemed especially impressed with Israel's. The students' responses seemed to indicate they had not expected such deep thinking from Israel. They had expected an interesting picture, but not an idea that was so thought-provoking.

Due to time constraints, only a few symbols could be shared, so we got together that afternoon to review the others. We could not believe our eyes! Each student's symbol seemed more significant than the last one. The students symbolized

*I drew this to show how
weak and how strong the blacks
are. The whites always had an
edge. How powerful the whites are.*

hate, prejudice, love, and fear. All of the students' symbols, including Israel's, were extremely noteworthy. These children really understood what Mildred Taylor was saying. They felt the characters' feelings. As part of the novel study, Israel went on to draw more symbols, each equally dramatic. The class began to anxiously await his presentations, and they verbally encouraged him to share his symbols with them. He was no longer the silent participant.

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The class began to have a new image of Israel. On the final evaluation form in response to the

question, "Did you discover anything about other classmates and their talents?" the class responded positively about Israel. They admired not only his drawings, but also his thinking. "I discovered that Israel had a lot of feelings in him." "I liked Israel's because he has a cool picture and a good poem." "I really liked Israel's symbols because the piece he wrote was really good." The students were not only validating his drawing, but also his written work.

His classmates enjoyed his symbols so much they were looking over his shoulder to see what his next symbol would be. We had seen him as a risk-taker during this novel study because he had not allowed his difficulty with syntax to stop him from writing what he had to say. However, he seemed to have found his voice through the symbols. In fact, in his explanation of his final symbol, he took on a poetic voice for the first time and was acknowledged for it by his classmates. Through his choice of words, Israel sketched an explicit sensory image. His reader felt the rumble of the thunder, the calming of the rain, and the warmth of the sun. Through his use of phrasing, he created the cadence of a poem.

A Closer Look at Israel's Path

As part of writing this paper, we re-examined Israel's work with a thoughtful eye. He had used imagery in his earlier journal entries, but we did not see it. He wrote, "I use to thin[k] pape [papa] was [big] but he lookes like a pea"; "Why is he puting so much on the line?"; and "my hero my dad." This imagery did not have the same kind of powerful impact on us that his symbols had because it was lost in his problematic writing. We did not see the power of his thinking until we offered him another way of making meaning through drawing.

This project not only created a changing view of Israel for his classmates, but also of himself. His final evaluation form revealed an increase in self-esteem and self-reliance. This was evident in his response to the question, "Did any symbols really surprise you?" He answered, "My hand that I did everbody liked it." When asked, "What did you learn about yourself by doing these activities? Did you find some hidden talents? Did you discover anything about other classmates and their

talents?" he answered, "that I can espars [express] my feeling better an drawing. I draw better then I write. That they undesaad as much as I did they had feelings." The experience of reading this particular novel also seemed to contribute to Israel's growth. He appeared to identify with the Logan family in the story. In response to the question, "What did you think of this novel?" Israel answered, "I like how the Logans never gave up no matter what." This theme is reflected in his letter on the cover of the Student Learning Profile, the district's reporting system, written to his mother shortly after completing this project. The words he used were, "I prove that I can do any thing if I try." Like the Logans, he overcame an obstacle. He was able to change his image of himself as a writer.

Dear Mom,

*I have done the
best I think I ever could have done.
I've proved to my self that and
to the others that if I try hard
I can do better then I ever thought I could in my
eye's
I have doen beond ex [exemplary]. I prove
that I can do any thing if I try. Oh yea and I
realy do
not like math and science 94% one more
point I would have gotten ex on math. Rember
at the beging of the year I was very
hard for me to do good now it is going smother.
Thing are a lot easer
esayer [easier].*

Israel

Israel also became a published poet. His work was included in our local *Teachers Applying Whole Language* newsletter. His classmates acknowledged his work by requesting copies of his poem. They no longer wanted only his symbols, but his written work, too. We found it interesting Israel chose to write a poem since this was a genre he had avoided in the past. We wondered if there were any connection to the comments made about the poetic nature of his final project explanation and his decision to write a poem.

Israel went on to have other successes to celebrate that year. His final writers' workshop

project was a six-chapter mystery. At Israel's end of the year Individual Educational Planning (IEP) meeting, his mother and teachers celebrated his journey to literacy and self-expression. His mother talked of their discussions about his writing at home. Israel was using his family as an audience to try out his writing ideas and to voice his frustrations about undeveloped pieces. Israel had become a true writer who labored over the writing process and the final product.

Reflecting on our Journey

It seems hard to believe that one strategy and book could have had such impact on a child. By empowering students to construct meaning using a different medium, it provided us an opportunity to experience the power of Israel's thinking. This strategy has now become an integral part of all of our novel studies. We have learned the importance of providing alternative ways of making meaning for all of the Israels of the world.

We kept track of Israel the next school year, until he moved, and learned he was continuing to be successful at the middle school earning B's and C's. We realize we did not cure Israel's learning disability in written expression, but we were able to offer him an alternative way to express himself, helping him to understand he does have something of value to share. Our job as educators is to continue to search for that strategy or piece of literature that reaches all children to find their voices as they travel on their journey to literacy.

Note: As much as possible we have preserved Israel's language. When absolutely necessary, we added words within brackets for clarity.

Works Cited

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