

July 1994

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Recommended Citation

Lehto, Barbara A. (1994) "Students Writing For Students," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 27: Iss. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol27/iss4/8>

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Students Writing For Students



ARTICLE BY **BARBARA A. LEHTO**

Chapter I reading teachers are faced with a variety of challenges: the students coming into a Chapter I program present a wide variety of reading problems, the program should reinforce and enhance the work occurring in the regular classroom (Allington & Shake, 1986), and the whole language movement has demonstrated the benefits of immersing students in print (Newman, 1985). Added to these is the task of finding money to buy new, and/or additional, reading materials.

I was confronted by all of these difficulties when I began to plan my first graders' remedial reading program. Knowing that repeated readings helps to build fluency (Samuels, Schermer, & Reinking, 1992), I wanted to reinforce the reading that the classroom teacher was doing, but I have found that reading the same stories from classroom books over and over has limited appeal to students. Buying several copies of supplemental books was a possibility but not really the answer I was looking for. I wanted great quantities of material that these first graders could read successfully.

At the same time I was looking for ways to increase writing opportunities for all of my Chapter I students. My second through sixth graders were familiar with story grammar and had had a lot of fun creating original stories. Even the second graders could talk confidently about characters, setting, problem, and problem solution, but I wanted to give them another purpose for writing besides entertaining themselves and

their classmates.

Students writing for students became a solution to my problems. I copied the word list from the back of the basal text that the regular classroom teacher was using with the first grade Chapter I students. Then I gave copies of this list to the second through sixth grade Chapter I students, and we were ready to create stories.

To get started we discussed picking out a topic and main idea for a story, which led to scanning the word list for nouns. We picked out proper nouns from the list, added the first graders' names, and then looked for common nouns. Armed with the "who" and "what," students then picked out verbs that would fit with the story's main idea. We went on to find adjectives that would add some color to the stories and fit with the characters, problem, and problem solution.

Students found that working with a limited vocabulary list was challenging. They were soon helping each other find ways to get across their ideas when the words they wanted to use weren't there. This led to many lively discussions that started out with, "But why can't you say ...?" or "Couldn't you say instead...?". Stories were kept short, usually about a dozen sentences, so most students wrote several, some creating chapter books with the same characters. Most also found ways to work the first graders' names into their tales.

After writing came revision time, and then we were ready to publish. This was accomplished with the computer and a

word processing program with which the older students were already familiar. The stories were printed on half-page size paper, duplicated with enough copies for each first grader, fitted with covers, and bound, four stories to a book.

The first grade students were happy to have story books designed especially for them, ones that they could take home and keep. However, the real excitement occurred when they started to read them and found their own names. They were amazed and eager to read to find out what "they" were doing in each story, and reading each one several times became a treat, not a chore.

Reviewing my "challenges," I found that students writing for students had met many of them. I was able to reinforce the classroom reading without having to use the text over and over; my students were building fluency and having fun doing it. I had disposable materials that I could allow students to keep, take home, and share with parents for added readings.

The program had provided writing opportunities for the second through sixth grade students, and grammar instruction in nouns, verbs, and adjectives that was easily understood by all the writers. They had practice in developing a *for real* topic and main idea instead of picking out ones from a sterile workpage, and the satisfaction of creating something that was to be used. For the second graders it was another way of reviewing and using some sight words

from their first grade year without being forced to go back to a first grade book.

The stories that were created will not win a Newberry prize, but don't tell the first graders that — they think they are wonderful. One parent shared the news that her son was so thrilled at seeing his name in print that everyone who visited their home was treated to a special reading of a story.

An added and possibly the most important benefit of the project was to give all the Chapter I students a feeling of accomplishment. Too often these students believe that they are academic failures, but here they were able to use their reading and writing abilities to help others. I believe that all students need to feel that they can make valuable contributions, but Chapter I students seldom get that opportunity. This project gave everyone involved a chance to succeed, and isn't student success the bottom line of all our school programs?

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