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Digging Deeper Into the Culture of Writing: Do Mentor Text Inspire Male Students to Write?

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Abstract

In a growing trend in schools across the country, girls are out-performing boys in the area of literacy. Some researchers would support a disconnection regarding specific topics taught in the literacy curriculum and the interests of boys (Gurian & Stevens, 2004). In our kindergarten and first grade classrooms, we have observed a difference in the participation between boys versus girls during writer's workshop.

In this article, we share our experiences, as two primary teachers, in utilizing mentor texts and mini-lessons to teach writing to our male kindergarten and first grade students. We will share research on Early Emergent literacy and gender within the classroom. We discuss our findings on how infusing mentor text into writer's workshop mini-lessons motivated our male students to write using author's craft. The research and our findings helped us answer the question: *How can we use mentor texts and teacher guided mini-lessons to help kindergarten and first grade boys use author's craft in their writing to show expression?* The goal of this article is to provide early childhood educators examples of writing lessons using mentor texts that will motivate male students to write.

Our Question

As the bell rings to conclude literacy centers, the students slowly make their way to the easel for the beginning of writer's workshop. They fidget around the carpet to find the perfect seat. They settle in their spot, to criss cross applesauce as directed by the teacher, and gaze at the blank easel. The teacher begins her mini-lesson on a particular writing skill, and she observes that some students are engaged, while other students are more interested in the glitter on the carpet. As the teacher hears her own voice instructing the class, she wonders to herself, how can she keep all students engaged through the mini-lessons, that she has implemented as part of writing workshop? As kindergarten and first grade teachers, we find ourselves in this same predicament every day while teaching our students about writing.

Although we teach in different school districts and grade levels, we have noticed similar patterns in our

students' learning styles, particularly the males. Both our districts implement shared reading, literacy centers, and writer's workshop as part of their literacy curricula. Forty-five minutes of every school day is devoted to writer's workshop, where students engage in writing mini-lessons. Mini-lessons include learning about punctuation, word choice, and adding describing words. Although students are enthusiastic at the start of writer's workshop, we have found, that male ? students soon fall into a pattern of writing about the same topics. These topics include family, sports, and pets. Our goal as kindergarten and first grade teachers is to help our students understand that in order to be creative writers, they need to develop an idea.

We have found that teaching students how to develop an idea for writing can be a difficult task. Female students in our classrooms are more willing to express their feelings during writer's workshop. In contrast, the male students are reluctant to take risks, and they continue to write about the same

themes. We began to wonder what would help our male writers become more inspired to share their stories and experiences. We took a closer look at the genres covered in our curricula, and realized there were not a wide variety of genres that would interest male students, such as fiction, nonfiction, letters, and comic books. Students were expected to write personal narratives and “how-to” books. We felt, after classroom observations, that the limitations in writing genres were inhibiting our male writers’ creativity and experience.

On the contrary, we noticed different patterns in student learning during shared reading. During one lesson in particular, we noted a male student expressed, “Can you please read that again? I love it when the pizza goes SPLAT!” We found that our kindergarten and first grade male students were mesmerized when listening to a story on the classroom carpet. As we watch them, we saw the characters’ emotions reflected in the students’ facial expressions. For example, if the character is sad or happy the students will reflect this emotion by either frowning or smiling while listening to the story. Male students in particular seem to participate more by sharing connections, making facial expressions, and laughing while listening to stories that involve action, adventure, and humor. We began to wonder how we could recreate this male student engagement during writer’s workshop. This led to developing the question: *How can we use mentor texts and teacher guided mini-lessons to help kindergarten and first grade boys use author’s craft in their writing to show expression?*

In seeking answers to our question, we realized we were conducting teacher research. All teachers formulate questions to enhance their instruction and improve student achievement. A teacher-researcher not only asks these difficult questions, but also uses an inquiry-based approach to find the answers. The process of teacher research requires daily reflections on student learning and teacher instruction. Goals are often adjusted depending on students’ performance and needs. Although questions are not instantly answered, this process provides the opportunity for teachers to learn from and with their students. In performing inquiry-based research, teachers should expect that students generally provide the answers to their questions. Just as

learning is a lifelong process, teacher research is an ongoing practice.

In recent years, we have seen a trend in boys underachieving in the areas of literacy. In particular, there is a disconnection between boys and genre writing. A typical characteristic of a boy author includes limited ability to express his emotions. Our purpose of this study is to use mentor texts and mini-lessons as a model and motivational tool to help boys express their feelings in their writing.

Boys vs. Girls

All students bring schema about their world, personal experiences, and interests to classroom discussion. However, there is a distinct difference between the children who come from families where literacy is valued versus those who have never been exposed to a story. Our teaching styles reflect the emergent literacy theory, and using mentor texts to drive our writing instruction will be the most beneficial approach to teach mini-lessons. Students’ personal experiences, along with their exposure to writing, greatly affect their abilities to develop ideas and to compose a writing piece. In our research, we examined the relationships between theory, gender, writing development, mentor texts, and mini-lessons (Clay, 1995).

According to Taylor and Lorimer (2002), “Boys score lower in language arts on standardized tests. Statistics reveal that boys are underachieving at a higher rate than girls in reading and writing” (p. 68). There seems to be a disconnection between the literacy curricula and the interest of boys. We see a difference in the participation of boys versus girls during writer’s workshop. The girls are more easily engaged during mini-lessons and sharing of writing, while the boys seem to be inattentive.

These observations led us to believe there was a need to adjust our schools’ writing curriculum. The genres covered by our curricula typically are not as interesting for boys because they want to read and write about fantasy and nonfiction topics. The current curriculum lacks the flexibility for male students to write for their own purposes and to explore ideas that are significant to them. According to Ralph Fletcher (2006), the author of *Boy Writers Reclaiming Their Voices*, current practices of

writer's workshop focus heavily on one genre, personal narrative. Curriculum should include topics such as letters, comic books, fiction, poetry, and personal narratives because, according to research about male writers, these topics help engage boys (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, Fletcher, 2006, Calkins & Oxenhorn, 2003).

The Plan

The study took place in a kindergarten and a first grade classroom in southern New Jersey. Although we teach in different school districts, our student population has similarities. Our students come from lower to middle class socioeconomic backgrounds. The majority of our students are Caucasian. Both of our classrooms consist of less than sixteen students and males make up half our class lists.

Our districts both implement shared reading and writer's workshop as part of the literacy curricula. During our four years in the classroom, we found there was a disconnection between the literacy curricula and the interest of boys in our classrooms. Boys have a more difficult time developing ideas and expressing their thoughts on paper. This lack of engagement often results in male students selecting familiar topics. These topics lack variety and often follow the same sentence pattern, such as "I like the ____" or "I see the _____."

According to Ray and Cleaveland (2004), "Our goal is to get [our male] students thinking about the fact that, before there can be a book, there has to be a writer who has an idea" (p. 160). Many young authors struggle to develop ideas because they have a difficult time organizing their thoughts. A mentor text is a book that exhibits a particular writing trait and is used as a model to teach author's craft. Mentor texts can be utilized in several different ways, including teaching vocabulary, writing organization, and to inspire creativity. By using mentor texts as a model for author's craft, we illustrated how books can help us develop questions, relate the plot to our own lives, and create images in our minds. Our modeling included specific teacher strategies, such as, using punctuation to show expression and adding details through the use of descriptive words.

Using mentor texts to guide our mini-lessons seemed to be a logical strategy to help scaffold our students' learning. Peter J. Lancia (1997) discovered in his research, "a saturation with literature directly influences writing by providing important models for successful work" (p. 470). In "saturating" our writing mini-lessons with literature appealing to our male students, we found that they would often "borrow" ideas or even the author's craft to guide their writing. In utilizing mentor texts and their literary devices to drive our mini-lesson instruction and modeling, we wanted to create a rich classroom experience that would act as a role model for all novice writers.

Based upon our observations, some of the weaknesses our male students demonstrated included an inability to express emotion through writing, provide a variety of sentence structure and word choice, and experiment with unfamiliar writing topics. By providing scaffolding with the help of mentor texts and mini-lessons, we found male writers were able to express their feelings comfortably.

In developing our mini-lessons, we used the mentor texts to help scaffold our students' knowledge about specific literary devices used by familiar authors. We searched for mentor texts that contained specific literary devices that we felt would be interesting for our male student population. These titles included *No, David!* and *David Gets In Trouble* by David Shannon (1998/ 2002), *Enemy Pie* by Derek Munson (2000), and *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst (1972). These texts were chosen because they depicted male characters involved in humorous and mischievous plots. We felt our male students could make text-to-self connections based upon the circumstances of the main characters. The purpose was to foster their reaction into a written response. For instruction purposes, these mentor texts were chosen because they included the following literary devices: repetitive texts, punctuation usage, and describing words. Through the immersion of texts and mini-lessons, students were able to examine multiple models of good writing. These reading and writing opportunities added to the ongoing process of the students' literacy development.

Our research method required data collection consisting of student interest surveys, classroom observations, and student writing samples. We monitored the students' development and application of the author's craft in their writing by collecting writing samples. During writer's workshop, we observed students working and took field notes of their discussions. We documented changes in the students' thinking through the use of pre- and post- lesson interest surveys. We hoped to uncover the answers to the following questions through our research: *Do certain books inspire boys to write more than others? Do certain authors motivate boys to express their feelings? How does the use of mentor texts and the implementation of literary device mini-lessons help students develop their voice in writing?* We used the data collection as a guide for writing our mini-lessons.

Our study began in September with a pre-interest survey and classroom observations. The surveys had a reoccurring theme of writing topics. These writing topics included family, animals, and sports. Male students felt the most difficult aspect of writing was sounding out unfamiliar words. Anecdotal notes were taken for forty-five minutes everyday during writer's workshop. Most of the notes were gathered during student and teacher conferences. At the conclusion of each lesson, all male students writing samples were collected. After writer's workshop and conferencing, we reflected upon our mini-lessons and student work. We looked for patterns within student writing samples and similarities in responses during classroom discussion. Through these observations, we were able to monitor each student's development and application of literary devices. Furthermore, we observed male students' lack of sentence variety, word choice, and selecting a topic to write about in their journals. Although our classrooms provided writing resources, such as word walls, anchor charts, and picture dictionaries, these resources were not appealing to many of our male students. We began to see they lacked a connection to these resources, and therefore were not using them independently as models of good writing. (See Appendix)

Mini-Lessons and Teacher Observations

The first mentor text we used in our study was *No, David!* by David Shannon (1998). Shannon wrote the story based on the mischievous adventures he experienced as a young boy. His adventures, which include jumping on the bed, walking mud through the house, and breaking plant pots, always resulted in his mother saying no! Our objectives for day one included identifying multiple character emotions (e.g., happy, angry, or excited) through observations of the author's illustrations. On day two, students used the author's craft of a repetitive word to add detail about emotions to their own illustrations and writing, for example, "No!"

For our kindergarten and first grade students, this simple text was engaging. Students were able to read aloud with the teacher and relate to the character's predicaments. They found the main character humorous, and students could make text-to-self connections with the character. During our mini-lesson, we focused on the author's craft of repeating words to add detail. We modeled how to "borrow" the author's craft of using the repetitive word "No!" in our own writing. Students were able to provide several examples of how the word "No!" related to their experiences. After the mini-lesson, students were able to apply the author's craft in their writing. For example, AJ, a first grader, wrote "AJ be quiet it is rest time. Then you got on red. But it was him not me! My teacher yelled at me saying stop talking." This student was able to relate to the character, David, and express his own experiences, while "borrowing" the author's craft. The illustrations in the story often depict an emotionally frustrated David. Although the student did not use the word "no," he identified the author's message of getting in trouble and feeling upset. The student was able to relate to the emotional illustrations and describe his frustrations in words. (See figure 1)

The second mentor text we used in our study was *David Gets in Trouble*, by David Shannon (2002). When David gets in trouble, it is never his fault. David learns that making excuses makes him feel

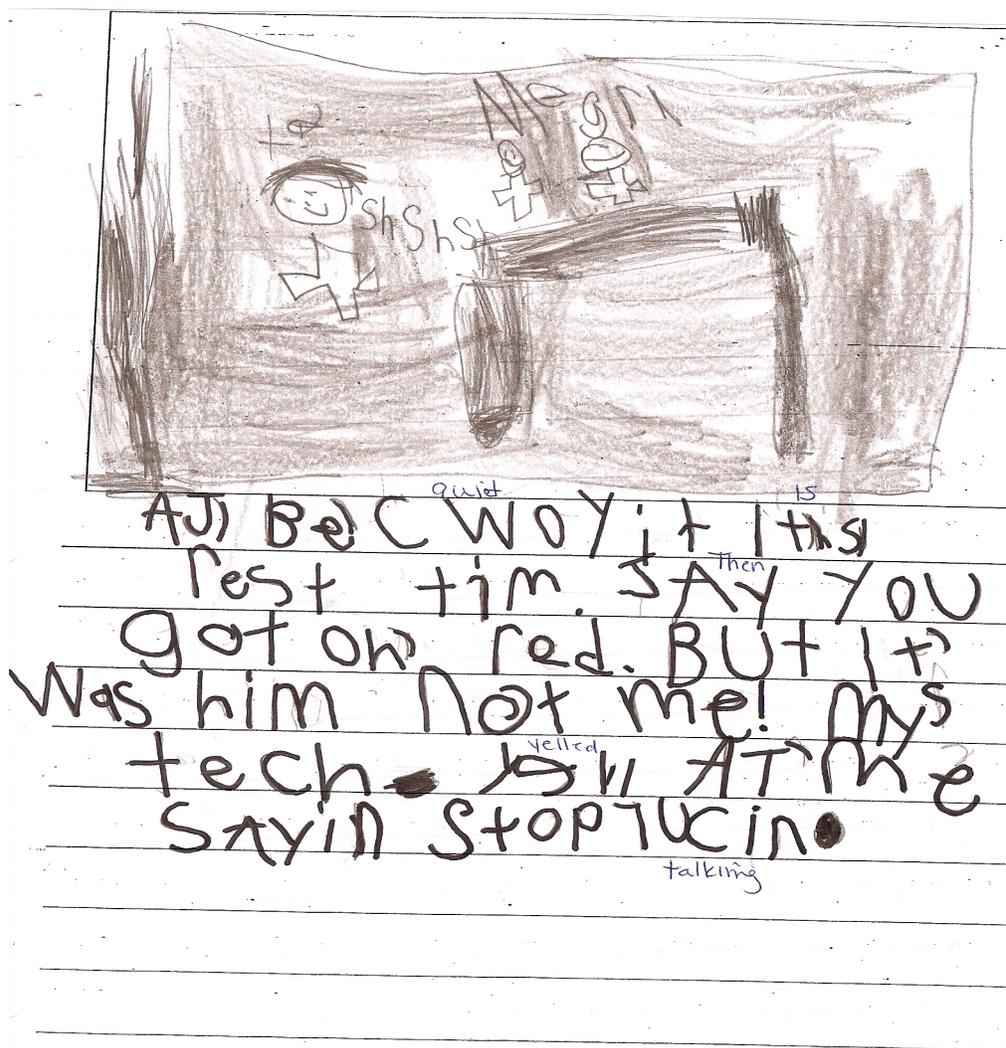


Figure 1. "AJ be quiet it is rest time. Then you got on red. But it was him not me! My teacher yelled at me saying stop talking."

bad, and that it is better to tell the truth. During writer's workshop, our objectives included making a connection to character expression by identifying the author's craft of making excuses. We discussed what an excuse means and the students orally provided examples of excuses. During the mini-lesson, we modeled the author's craft of making excuses by using the example, "My book is at home. I forgot!" Lance, a kindergarten student, wrote in his journal, "I forgot about my friend." (See figure 2). Students used the author's craft of making excuses as a model for using punctuation to show expression, or they could "borrow" author's expressions in their own writing, for example: "I forgot..." or "No!"

The third mentor text we chose was *Enemy Pie*, by Derek Munson (2000). This story is about making enemies into friends. A new neighbor intimidates the young character, but after spending a fun-filled day with each other, he learns his enemy is not that bad after all. Our lesson objectives included identifying the author's craft of using colorful language. On the second day of writer's workshop, the students used the author's craft of using colorful language to add detail to their own writing, for example, "My pizza has slimy worms." Compared to the David Shannon books, this mentor text did not engage the students. Students had a difficult time relating to the character, and the author's style

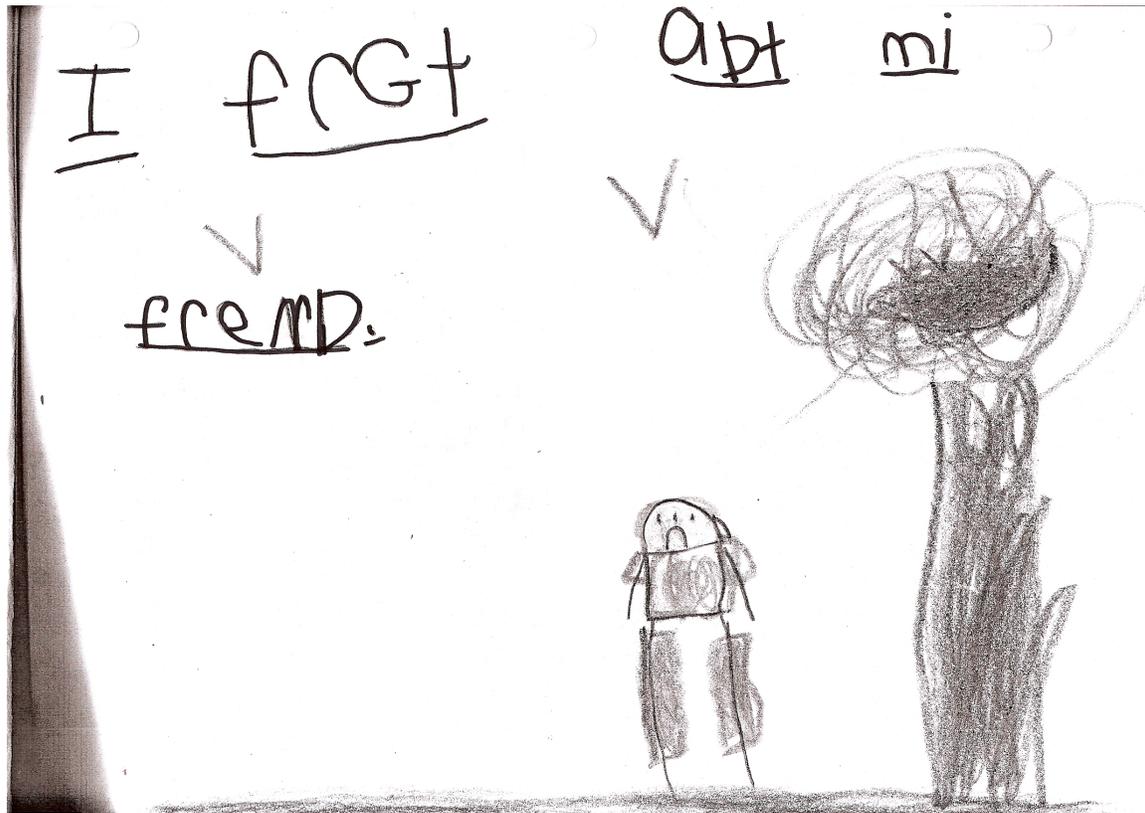


Figure 2. "I forgot about my friend."

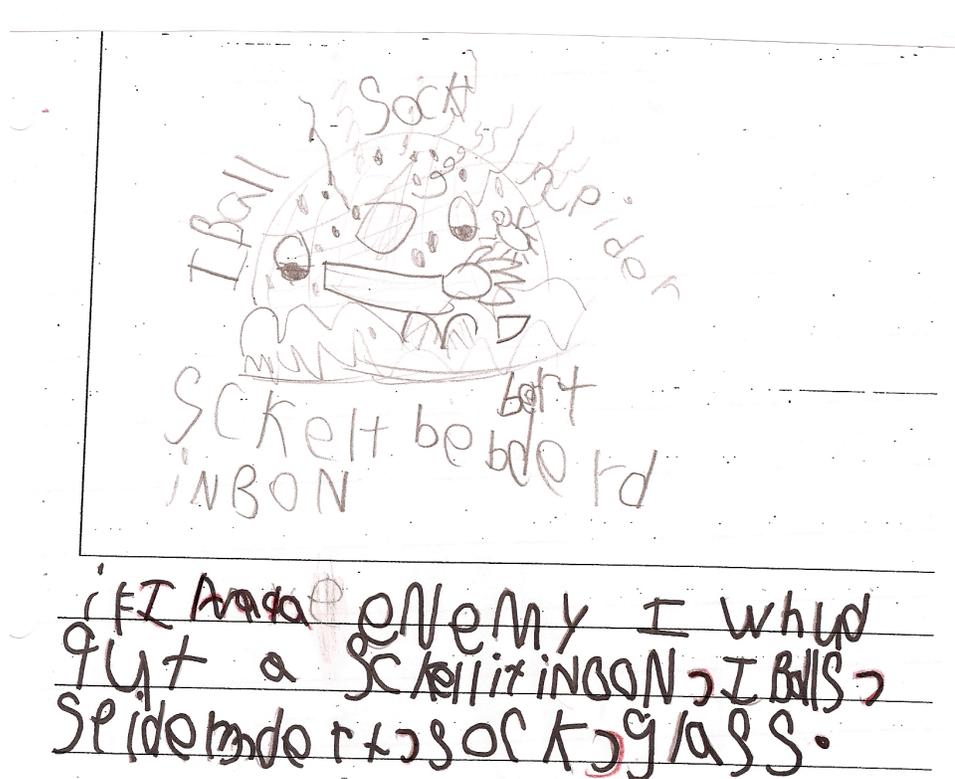


Figure 3. "If I had an enemy, I would put a skeleton, eyeballs, spiders, socks, and glass."

of writing was not simple enough for kindergarten and first graders. Although students did not seem as enthusiastic about this text, many male students were able to identify and use colorful language in their writing. For example, Christian, a first grader, wrote, “If I had an enemy, I would put a skeleton, eyeballs, spiders, socks, and glass.” (See figure 3)

During this writer’s workshop session, male students were able to stay on topic and provide connections to the main character in the story. They could relate to the character’s emotion of feeling defeated because he did not get his way. One male kindergarten student, Sam, wrote in his journal, “Sam had a very bad day. Writing was today. I hate writing.” (See figure 4)

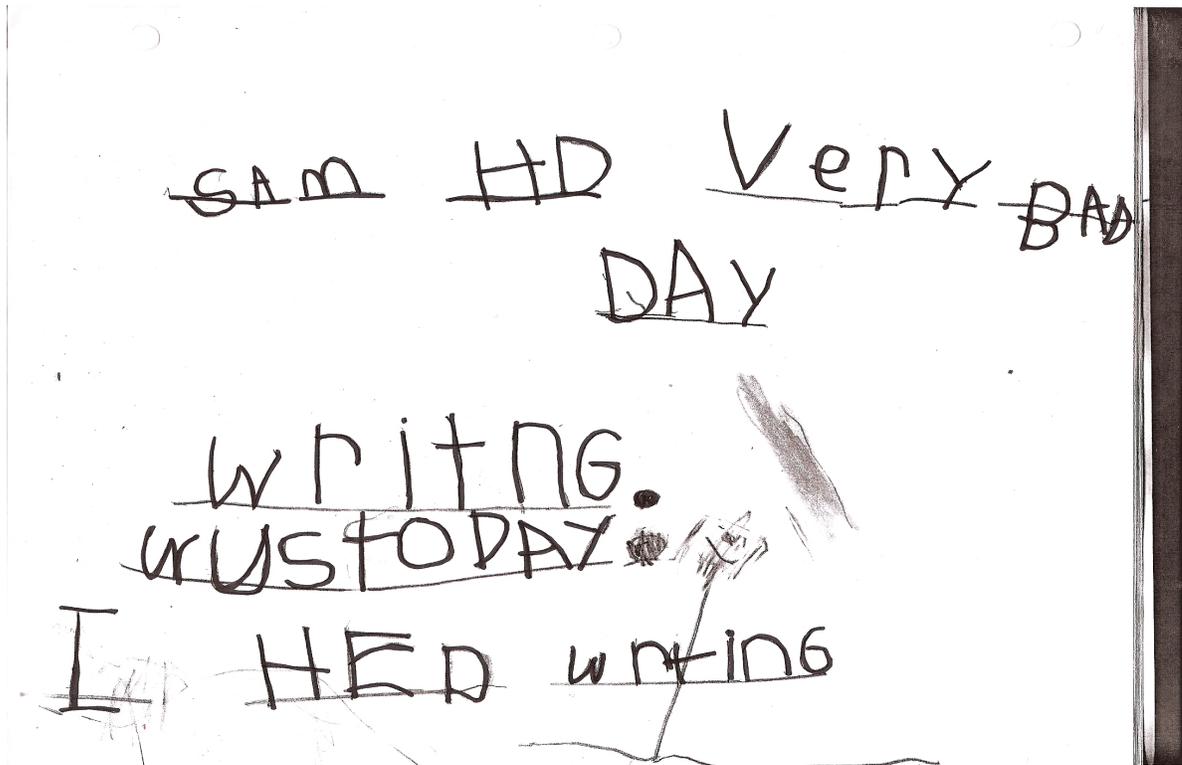


Figure 4. “Sam had a very bad day. Writing was today. I hate writing.”

The last mentor text we used to model author’s craft was *Alexander’s Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, by Judith Viorst. On the first day of writer’s workshop, students identified the use of repetitive text within the story. We discussed how this craft can help readers connect to the character’s thoughts and feelings. On the second day, students “borrowed” the author’s craft of repetitive words in their own writing. For example, students were encouraged to use words such as no, bad day, or terrible to describe their emotions in their writing. The use of repetitive language helped to reinforce the students’ emotions. The students seemed to enjoy this text the most, and participated during the

read aloud by shouting the repetitive text, “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.”

Discussion

After examining our findings, we were able to triangulate the student interest surveys, writing samples, and our teacher observations and found reoccurring themes. Before we implemented our mini-lessons, we observed our students struggling in the following areas: selecting a writing topic, spelling, word choice, and sentence variety. At the conclusion of each mini-lesson, the students’ writing samples improved. Male students were more likely to take a risk in selecting a different

writing topic. These topics reflected a more personal experience and glimpse into their lives. For example, they wrote about their relationships with family members and friends, and even experiences when they were unhappy. The students were able to share these feelings more easily because of the modeling provided by the mentor texts. The author's examples provided the students with inspiration, as well as a structure, to help them explain their feelings. After reading the mentor texts aloud, students were more productive and motivated during the mini-lesson and independent writing time. Students participated during the mini-lessons by raising their hands to share personal connections to the text and their observations about the author's craft. They left the mini-lessons excited to write about their experiences.

Even though their work showed improvement in topic selection, word choice, and sentence variety, there was little improvement in student spelling. Due to their excitement in sharing their experiences on paper, male students seemed less concerned about spelling words correctly. Their lack of concern led them to write more because they were not aware of their spelling errors. We were excited to see an increase in the length of their writing, however, their spelling errors made their writing difficult for readers. We now realize we could extend our mini-lessons on a mentor text by including lessons on spelling. For example, if the author used several words with blends or word family patterns, we could have highlighted these skills in the same way we modeled the author's craft. In future lessons, we will include spelling instruction to help build well-rounded writers.

Our mentor text selection was based on the interests of our male students. All the texts featured male main characters and the plots included either mischievous or humorous acts we felt our male students could make connections to. Based upon their writing samples, male students were able to make connections to the mentor texts and apply the author's crafts in their writing. The guidance provided by the chosen mentor texts, along with the modeling on how to use literary devices during mini-lessons, helped build students' confidence in their writing abilities. We feel the male students in

our classrooms took more risks in their writing due to the confidence they gained from the mini-lessons.

An improvement was evident in students' writing samples. We were pleasantly surprised by the way our male students reacted to the author's craft. Their writing was focused on a topic and had a clear message. Although students could write about topics of their choice during writer's workshop, the mentor texts greatly influenced their thoughts. Instead of using the sentence patterns "I like the ____" or "I see the _____," students used a variety of words and sentence patterns to express their thoughts and feelings. At the end of our study, we administered a post interest survey to see if students' thoughts about writing changed. Students still felt the most difficult aspect of writing was sounding out unfamiliar words. Their topic choices continued to include family, animals, and sports. However, some male students stated they enjoy using the author's words during their writing.

Due to time constraints, our study only included four mentor texts. We feel that although these mentor texts made an impact on the students' writing, it would have been beneficial to allot more time to each text. There are so many literary devices that could be modeled using picture books. Our students' success has led us to continue to search for mentor texts that include literary devices that will support our mini-lessons.

During our journey as teacher-researchers, we were able to learn with and from the students. Overall, we found several consistent themes in the students' learning. Male students were excited about topics that involved inappropriate behavior and things that are disgusting. These topics are generally not discussed, nor encouraged, in classroom settings. Furthermore, male students strongly expressed a dislike for writing and spelling. These themes were evident in their pre and post-interest surveys and their writing samples. By combining our mini-lessons with interesting picture books, we were able to disguise the difficult aspects of writing. Students were focused on writing like the author, rather than concentrating on the writing process. Our classroom libraries now include such books as *Don't Let the Pigeon Ride the Bus!* by Mo Willems, *How I Became a Pirate* by Melinda Long, and *Go Away,*

Big Green Monster! by Ed Emberley. We are providing additional support in phonics development using strategies such as Elkonin boxes, making and breaking words with magnetic letters, blending boards, and teaching segmenting skills, we to improve students word knowledge. Furthermore, we are teaching a variety of genre writing during writer's workshop. We feel by including these teaching interventions, male students may be more confident and successful in writing.

Conclusion

The use of mentor texts and mini-lessons are a beneficial approach to helping male students succeed in writer's workshop. The mentor texts and mini-lessons act as encouragement and guidance for male students to take risks in their writing. The mini-lessons portray how to use specific literary devices to show emotion in writing. According to Fletcher and Portalupi (2008), "The writing classroom is built on a foundation of literature" (p. 10). In using mentor texts to support our students' writing, we are scaffolding our students' knowledge about the connection between literature and writing.

In order to support our mini-lessons, we found four texts that support male writers. These texts encompassed characters, plots, and literary devices that our male students found interesting. Our kindergarten and first grade boys were interested in using literary devices that included humorous and repetitive characteristics. These models supported students in taking writing risks that were not evident in their writing samples before. Such risks included using a variety of words and sentence patterns.

Incorporating mentor texts and mini-lessons into our writer's workshops was a successful approach to elicit emotion into our male students' writing. The author's craft inspired the students to make personal connections and provided word choice they could easily use in their writing. Selecting text according to your students' interests can help students support their learning. The use of mentor texts can lend insight to a student's past experiences, helping them connect to the characters and situations presented in the book. Many writing curricula do not meet the needs and interests of

young boys. Therefore, the use of carefully selected mentor texts is a unique approach to inspire male students to write. Based upon our observations and the data collected, we feel this teaching strategy could be utilized in any grade level to teach a variety of literary devices.

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Appendix

Primary Writing Interest Survey

1. Do you like writing? What do you like about writing?
2. What do you think is hard about writing?
3. What do you like to write about?
4. When someone reads you a sad story what does it make you think of?
5. When someone reads you a happy story what does it make you think of?