

Engaging and Empowering Students to Write: The Principal Influence

BY REGIE ROUTMAN



In loving memory, this article is dedicated to James Phillips, a principal who was joyfully devoted to making his school an excellent writing school.

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y literacy work of the last 15 years as instructional coach and mentor doing demonstration teaching in diverse classrooms has led me to an inescapable conclusion: you can't teach much of anything of real consequence until you engage students' hearts and minds. Yet every time I am invited to teach writing in a school, the stated reason is to raise test scores and achievement. Engagement and enjoyment never come up. No teacher or administrator has ever said, "Our kids dislike and fear writing, and we do too," although this is often the case. No one has ever asked, "What's the first and most important thing we need to do to teach writing well?" I am not talking about data analysis, which is, admittedly, a necessary step. I am advocating for instructing students in a manner that leads them to willingly and joyfully apply what we're teaching them in and out of school for real-world purposes.

In planning my lessons for a weeklong writing residency, I begin with the end in mind and ask myself this crucial question: what can I do with the students, teachers, and principal that will show them the power and joy of writing? I know from many years of experience that if I can hook the students with a topic that appeals to them, I've done the hardest part of the writing work. The "right" writing topic will be one that gives students agency in their lives, appeals to their

interests, and fully engages them. If I get the topic right—and in writing, that almost always includes an audience and purpose that students value—I can teach students everything they need to know about effective writing. But without that engagement, we can't get kids to do much that matters, and it's difficult to raise and sustain achievement. Students will revise and edit to please the teacher; they will follow the guidelines that have been set, but that writing work will, in general, lack strong voice, immediacy, and power unless students see personal relevance for the work.

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Another critical factor is that principal leadership is a necessity for raising and sustaining achievement in a school. I used to think that strong teacher leadership could override the effect of a weak principal, but I was proved wrong. I have yet to see high reading or writing achievement school-wide without the principal as a knowledgeable, effective instructional leader. Therefore, I devote at least one-third of the literacy residency to mentoring and working side by side with the principal each afternoon. The potential of principal as writer, co-learner, and instructional leader is illustrated by the following story, which took place in a small, rural, K–5 public school in the Pacific Northwest during the last week in September 2010.

A bit of background first. The principal in this school is a former middle and high school music teacher who was previously a platinum recording artist. As a third-year elementary school principal, he is working hard to become a strong instructional leader. Staff turnover in the building is low; most of the staff members have been teaching at the school for several years or more. The school comprises 330 students, 58 percent of whom qualify for free and reduced lunch. The English language learner population continues to increase each year. A close look at data revealed writing achievement to be the major literacy concern.

The writing residency in this K–5 school took place in a primary grade classroom and an intermediate grade classroom, with corresponding classroom and specialist teachers released to observe my demonstration lessons. Writing scores in the school had been depressed for years. Benchmark writing samples in late September revealed poor handwriting and spelling, lack of pride in work, and 4th graders who were writing approximately two years below grade level. When the staff convened to discuss

their jointly held writing beliefs (Routman, 2008a), they agreed on these two: (1) students need to see their teachers as writers and (2) students who read more are better writers. These beliefs are publicly posted in the school.

I had several conversations with the principal, literacy coach, and both host classroom teachers prior to my school visit. Much of what we discussed was based on whole-school and grade-level feedback I had requested from all staff members, specifically,

what's going well in writing, what are your concerns or questions, and what do you hope to see me demonstrate in the residency? Both primary and intermediate teachers wanted to learn how to build an authentic purpose for the writing, motivate students, help students who don't know what to write about, and help struggling writers with organization.

Shared writing, where the teacher is in charge of the writing and holds the pen, seemed to be an optimal way to begin our writing work together. In shared writing, students freely offer their suggestions orally without the worry of transcription. The teacher acts as scribe, accepting anything that makes sense (the writing can be revised later) while gently helping students shape the writing. Students, then, are free to offer their thinking without fear of failure or worrying about complete sentences, spelling, and handwriting. Ann, the 4th grade teacher in whose classroom I'd be demonstrating, knew immediately what her students were "hot about" when I asked her for an engaging topic. "Lunchtime," she said. The lunchtime topic proved to be a terrific catalyst for energizing the whole school around writing and for getting the principal directly involved in supporting and valuing the teaching of writing.

When I first met with the 4th graders, they agreed the lunchroom issues would be something they were highly interested in improving. I suggested to them that writing a persuasive letter to the person who might be able to change the situation was a real-world action that could yield results. We agreed the person to write to would be the principal, James P. I further suggested that if they wanted him to make improvements to their lunchtime, they needed to begin with positive comments and first state what was going well before stating the problem and offering possible solutions. My

advice: “Your principal is very busy. Your letter has to be clear, to the point, and easily readable. You need to help him solve the problem, not just complain about what’s wrong.”

And so, pen in my hand, with the whole class of 31 students gathered around, we began. “Who has a good opening sentence that will let your principal know exactly why we’re writing?” We then orally brainstormed all the things about lunchtime they

time over the weekend to give full, thoughtful consideration to all their concerns. He also agreed to “walk in their shoes” by offering to be the last person on the end of the hot-lunch line and experience the 20-minute lunchtime as the students did. His respectful tone, seriousness of purpose, and the unhurried time he took to meet with the students left a strong impression. Every student was engaged and hopeful, and their attention never wavered during his visit.

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liked and, because students’ ideas unfolded quickly, I wrote them as a bulleted list: “able to talk, get good food, salad bar ready, cookie day, lines move fast.” Next, we stated the problems in a similar way: “not enough food, not enough time, food not ready, water needed.” And, finally, the students offered their ideas to help solve the problem, including adding more time to the 20-minute lunchtime, being able to sit anywhere, and having water easily available.

Working with a sense of urgency, we completed our chart in about 20 minutes. One of the observing teachers word processed the draft and made copies for our upcoming small-group work. On the following day, after clearly stating the directions and purpose for the small-group work, students—who were organized by ability and gender into heterogeneous groups of four—collaborated for about 15 minutes to improve the draft. Pen in hand, the designated scribe for each group recorded and revised according to group consensus. Ann and I circulated and offered guidance and support as needed. Such small-group work is crucial for hearing all the voices, documenting students’ work and thinking, and evaluating the group’s process. Moreover, this kind of small-group work can be an efficient, effective instructional tool for ensuring full student participation and engagement across the curriculum.

Finally, we brought all groups back together and quickly reworked the draft in a public discussion. Each group gave input from the revised papers, and I helped shape the students’ comments into our final letter. The completed letter, which was signed by all class members, was hand delivered to the principal. The next day, the principal came into the classroom and told the students how moved he was by their letter, their concerns, and their suggestions. He said he would do what he could but requested reflection

The letter James P. subsequently wrote and delivered to the students shows how seriously he took their letter and requests. The principal’s letter beautifully demonstrates, in great detail and without condescension, a carefully considered response to important student concerns (see Figure 1). The students were overjoyed. Not only did their principal thoughtfully respond to every issue they raised, he found solutions—many of them offered by the students—to address their concerns. James P. found a way to extend the lunch hour by five minutes, something he told me would be nearly impossible to do because of scheduling and other nonnegotiable issues. In addition, he found practical solutions for having adequate water available, addressed seating options, and even suggested in conversation with the students that they think about writing a letter to the company that runs the food service to address the cost of charging for seconds on food. I encouraged James P. to lead the shared writing of that letter, and he willingly took on that task with a class of eager writers. The lesson for the students was unmistakable: writing can be an effective vehicle for giving voice to important issues and sometimes things can change for the better.

There were lessons for James P. as well. He saw for the first time the impact he could have interacting with students as a writer himself. He felt what it was like to write and revise a letter for an important audience. He experienced firsthand how influential a principal’s participation can be for turning kids on to writing. And he also experienced the pleasure and power of authentic writing. He now goes into classrooms every day and notices and affirms what students and teachers are doing in all subjects, including writing. He says it’s the best part of his day and gives him great joy. James P. made the following comment on the impact of this writing experience:

I felt a deeper connection with students. I was impressed by their courage, and it gave me the courage to have some hard conversations about writing, teaching, and learning in the building. The experience also validated for me that expectations have to be high and can be high when students are doing something that's connected in a meaningful way to what's really important to them.

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principals, and facilitates ongoing professional conversations and whole-school change.

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Figure 1

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To the courageous students of Mrs. Thomson's class:

I appreciate your very thoughtful and well-written letter. Your teamwork, on so many levels, reflects a maturity beyond your years. It doesn't take a great deal of smartness to merely complain about a situation. You, on the other hand, have undertaken the arduous task of informing me of what you like in the cafeteria as well as what you hope to change. But to take it a step further, you brainstormed together to present a variety of workable solutions for me to consider and I applaud you for your effort. Let me address each concern individually.

First, I would like to thank you for your positive comments. Our food service company has made extensive efforts to raise the nutritional bar in the cafeteria while improving the overall deliciousness of the food selections. As a side note, they also buy a large percentage of the produce from local Oregon farms. I am glad you get to talk and that you get a choice of seats within your classroom area. Isn't it amazing that our fabulous kitchen staff has the salad bar cleaned and stocked for all the lunches with such delectable choices?

As to your concerns, I would like to break them down into three categories: 1) you don't have enough time to eat and talk, 2) sometimes the kitchen runs out of many of your favorite entrees, and 3) you would like water to be available. You also mentioned that you were crammed in your tables. The tables were designed for three to a seat and while that can be a bit tight, I did notice that there were other options for seating where one or no kids were sitting.

Although the master schedule at Sandy Grade is very complex, I believe the most viable solution to issue # 1 would be to add 5 minutes to the end of your lunchtime. As to issue # 2, I spoke with Mrs. Pack in the cafeteria and she informed me that water will be available for sale beginning October 7th for \$1.00 per bottle. Additionally, they are expecting in the very near future to have large jugs of water and cups available. Of course, you may always bring your water bottle to lunch as long as it is okay with your teacher. Would those go in the lunch tub if you are getting hot lunch? Finally, I relayed your concern to Mrs. Pack about running out of your favorite foods – can you make me a list of what those might be – I know that you love nachos! What else do you like?

A final item that you brought to my attention alludes to reducing charges for seconds. This is a matter of which I have no control. Sodexo, the company that runs our food service in the Oregon Trail School District sets these policies. Let me point out, though, that if you are still hungry, you may go back to the scrumptious salad bar as many times as you like.

Again, thank you for your thoughtfulness in submitting this very concise and well-written proposal. To make your voices heard by taking the time to be reflective and pursue an important issue as a team with such sophistication makes me proud to be your principal. It is my intent that I have addressed these issues in a manner that is beneficial for all.