

Jen Mathieson

Writing Inquiry:

Learning to write is one very important aspect of literacy, one that I have an interest in teaching. Ensuring that each student in a class has the ability and opportunity to write is something that I feel very strongly about. Because each student is so different from the other, I have realized that teaching writing (such an important and vital skill in learning literacy) needs to be catered to each student's needs, and that differentiated instruction is a must. As I taught writing to my first grade class, I learned that it is vital to "design instruction to support students with varying reading proficiencies, learning styles, and language backgrounds" (Harvey & Goudvis 36). Differentiated instruction is necessary for all students in a class, even for those who not struggling.

As I taught a unit on writing and revision, I realized that differentiated instruction is a vital part of ensuring the unit, and class, are as functional as possible. One thing I learned throughout my teaching is that it is important to continuously conference and informally assess students in order to understand exactly what their interests are and what they are capable of. As I monitored the room throughout the first few lessons, I noticed that my actions were not catered to any particular student's needs; that my lessons were geared toward the class as a whole. After my third lesson it was apparent that one of my students was struggling significantly with his writing and getting his thoughts onto paper, while others had no problem writing entire booklets full. My struggling writer, Eli, struggles correlating the sounds he hears and writing those sounds on paper, mixing letters and sounds, and has trouble reading his own writing. Not only does this student have trouble writing, but his speech is very difficult to understand. After reflecting on this lesson, I asked my MT about what some things we could do to help Eli and the rest of our

students learn as much as they possibly can. This realization sparked my interest in, and understanding that differentiation in our instruction was imperative, especially for Eli.

My epiphany, that I needed to involve differentiation for this specific student, and all others, caused me to concentrate on the strengths that they have, and think of how I could involve all of the unit pieces and mold them to cater to each of my students' needs. Concentrating on a deeper level to my students and their capabilities, and continuing to learn how to differentiate instruction became my own personal challenge throughout this unit. I knew that in order to ensure that all of my students did well, especially my students that struggle with writing, I needed to focus on including "instruction that responds to each individual student's needs", but similar enough to have a coherent lesson and unit (Harvey & Goudvis 36). This was especially important because "language shapes and expands thinking", and Eli struggles with both reading and his language, therefore hindering him from the get go in regards to this writing unit (Harvey & Goudvis 36).

As I watched my students work with their partners, I realized that Eli was continuing to struggle. I decided to have Eli write his story first, but then tell me his beginning, middle and end, so I could write what he said above his letters. Rather than focusing completely on what letters he used to tell his story, Joelee (my MT) and I decided that understanding the idea of beginning, middle, and end, as well as conventions of writing (punctuation and capitalization) was a step in the right direction. I realized that in order to follow Eli's IEP I would have to work with the reading specialist, speech therapist, and my MT to allow Eli to work with his limited vocabulary and speech, and be able to put it into writing in a progressive and purposeful way. We focused on using visuals for Eli to follow (a plan that goes along with his writing, and anchor charts), as a way to ensure progression with his writing and reading. According to Regie

Routman, using visuals is a powerful way to ensure that “students experience success even though writing transcription may be difficult” (171). Incorporating visuals, and allowing Eli to do his work with guidance made him feel like his writing was just as valuable as the other students, and allowed other students (our 5<sup>th</sup> grade buddies especially) to read the story he wanted so badly to get on paper.

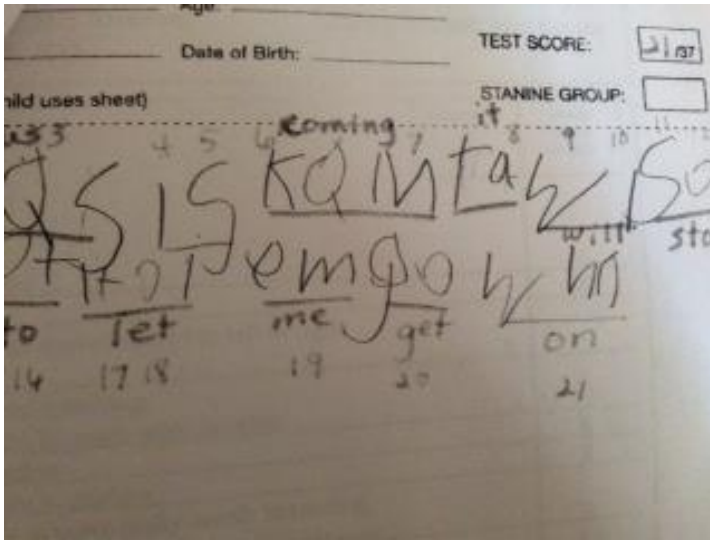
As I worked with Eli, I realized that differentiating instruction for each student’s needs required me to challenge the excelling writers as well as guide my struggling writers at the same time. I needed to keep my standard of teaching equivalent for my struggling students and my excelling students. Partner work became a great way to have my students read their own writing, as well as practice reading their writing to strengthen fluency and clear penmanship. My excelling writers were encouraged to add more details in their writing, include bold beginnings and examples of rich writing, and have strong mechanics throughout; while my struggling writers were encouraged to do the same, just on a slower and clearer pace. When working with another set of partners, their 5<sup>th</sup> grade buddies, my students each had a task. My struggling students were to focus on their beginning, middle and end as well as conventions of writing. My excelling students were also asked to focus on their beginning, middle and end, conventions of writing, but also: add stronger and richer details, add transition words and compare their work to the revisions that their buddies did to check if they could revise their own. Working with partners allowed all of my students the opportunity to hear and read writing from their peers, and to continue to grow at their own pace.

Because of the range of writing my students can produce, and the differentiation occurring class wide; I was lucky to have my MT so readily available during our student’s writing time. Joelee worked with conferring with students while I did the same. Having the two of us able to

work one-on-one with students was beneficial because it allowed more time to listen to each story, and really understand what skills each student needed to focus on. Especially in Eli's situation, it was crucial to differentiate what he would do during our writing time. In order to alleviate some of the stress that he feels, and ensure that he still learns the same content as others, Joelee and I worked to cater the process to his needs in order for a product to emerge similar to the rest of the class.

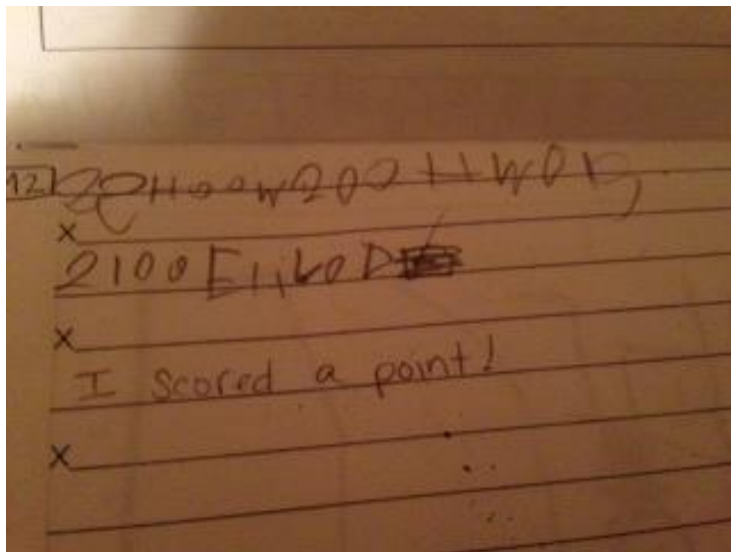
By doing so, Eli has made gains in his writing, reading and speaking. As the unit progressed, Eli became more comfortable writing, and began writing more on each page. He needed friendly reminders to add punctuation at times, but overall his understanding of the kind of story we were expecting was clear, and his stories included beginning, middles and endings. Even after this unit, Eli has made gains. The first sentence of his baseline writing (for the new unit) included clear beginning sound and word correlation, punctuation and a capital letter at the beginning. Eli's growth in writing is evidence that differentiation is needed for students with all types of strengths, and that there is always something that can be done to ensure all students have opportunities to succeed.

Eli's Writing Samples:



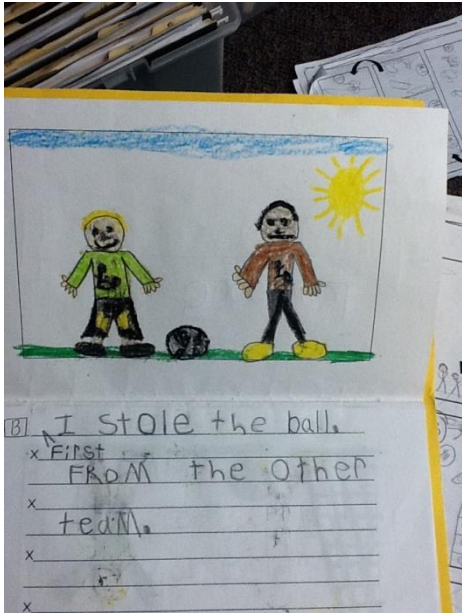
Eli's hearing sounds and words

assessment

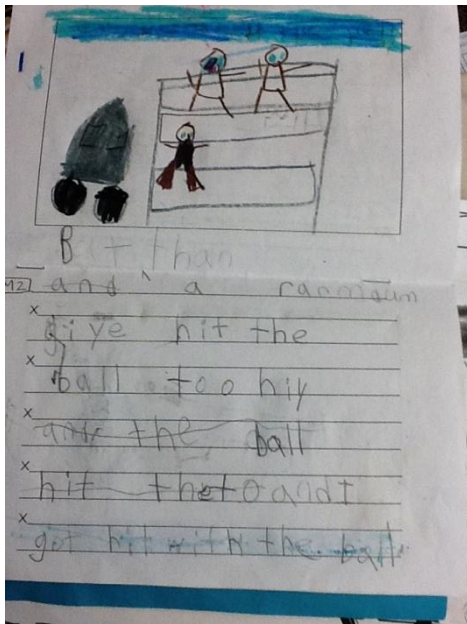


Eli's writing, with my writing next to it. He tends to write Eli W when he means to write about himself (last few letters he wrote).

Excelling Writers' Work:



Seth added a transition word and used strong phonemic awareness skills to stretch out the sounds to make each word. He attempts to use punctuation as well.



Lucy used many of the revision skills we learned and worked on this unit (strike outs, carets, transition words and more details).

Works Cited:

- Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis. *Strategies that Work. Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement.* 2007 Stenhouse Publishers. Pembroke Publishers Limited. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.
- Regie Routman. *Writing Essentials. Raising Expectations and Results while Simplifying Teaching.* 2005. Heinemann.