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What a Writer Needs Book Review

“Remember, let’s work on our writing stamina!” During my student teaching, my mentor teacher voiced this expectation to our fourth graders at the start of independent writing time. It is a phrase that I repeat now in my own classroom. However, I have to practice what I preach to my upper elementary students. Teaching writing is a subject where I have ideas for prompts and mini-lessons in my head, but I want to improve on successfully implementing them to make a positive difference in student writing. I tell my students to work on their stamina, to keep on going in a writing piece; I also need to build my own stamina in terms of persevering through issues when it comes to the teaching of writing. In *What a Writer Needs*, Ralph Fletcher provides insight and guidance that I can use for strengthening my writing classroom.

Fletcher starts his book by prioritizing mentors as an essential element. A theme throughout *What a Writer Needs* is the role that mentors play in developing writers both young and old. Fletcher describes several qualities of a mentor: holding high standards, building on strengths, valuing originality and diversity, encouraging students to take risks, and being passionate about the craft. Learning about the different qualities a mentor needs to exhibit supports my growth in the three knowledge areas of writing, students, and teaching. For example, as a writing mentor I strive to build on the strengths of my students. In a descriptive explanation, Fletcher (2013) asserts that a mentor “reaches into the chaos [of a piece of writing], finds a place where the writing works, pulls it from the wreckage, names it, and makes the writer aware of this emerging skill with words” (p. 14). A teacher’s ability to do this showcases how they can connect their knowledge of the craft of writing and of teaching writing to their knowledge of each student’s developing skillset. Mentors play a powerful role because “careful

praise of this kind can fuel a writer for a long time” (Fletcher, 2013, p. 14). As I continue in my teaching career, I am determined to develop in these mentor qualities to best support student confidence and growth.

In addition, another takeaway from *What a Writer Needs* is Fletcher’s strategies on incorporating details. “The Art of Specificity” chapter resonates with me as an upper elementary teacher. At this stage in my student’s writing development, one of my writing goals is for them to go beyond the bare minimum in order to expand on their thoughts with concrete details. The mantra of “the bigger the issue, the smaller you write” (Fletcher, 2013, p. 49) reminds me of the watermelon and seed strategy for writing about small moments. By narrowing the focus of a story into a small moment, it can make the event itself more significant and engaging.

Throughout his book, Fletcher suggests ways for students to write smaller. For instance, if students create a simple map or timeline of the event, it can help them focus on how they will describe the small moment. Students can also identify the hot spot of their story and the teacher can guide them then in slowing down the details to create a memorable climax. Furthermore, Fletcher explains how incorporating the five senses leads to more fleshed out descriptions of a story’s characters and setting. Readers are selfish, Fletcher claims, we want an enriching experience. By implementing these various ways to include detail, the writer proves that they have something worth saying.

Another major idea from *What a Writer Needs* involves what revision is and should be like in the writing classroom. Despite revision being an integral part of the writing process, students often develop an anti-revision attitude, where “they groan when we urge them to go back, reread, and find ways to make the piece better” (Fletcher, 2013, p. 166). Fletcher asserts that it is a mistake for teachers to insist that our students revise. Instead, it needs to be up to the

writer - if they are not interested in revising, perhaps it is time for them to work on a new piece of writing.

Nonetheless, Fletcher offers guidance on how teachers can more constructively support the revision process. In my experience as a writing teacher, revising has been more passive on the student's end. I am usually the one suggesting what should be done to make their piece stronger. Instead of me telling a student "add more description to this spot," we can engage in a conversation about their piece. In such a conversation, the student might reveal more information orally. This then helps me more explicitly scaffold my revision suggestions for them. Fletcher does caution that this needs to balance with his editor-writer relationship condition of give and take. Teachers (the editors) need to defuse that power imbalance and make sure that students (the writers) still have ownership of their writing. We can open the door for students and strive to create a writing environment that encourages risk-taking and revising as a way to make writing shine.

Fletcher's many ideas and strategies in *What a Writer Needs* provides me with information that I will implement in my classroom. At the beginning of his book, he states that writing brings about "every imaginable kind of thorny problem" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 1). This is a key explanation for why I have been intimidated by teaching writing as an early career teacher. In less than five years of classroom teaching, multiple students come to my mind when Fletcher lists problems like students that are reluctant writers, cannot use conventions properly, and struggle to read what they have written on the page. When a thorny problem arose during writing time, I would be unsure of how to best continue teaching. This ties into Fletcher's (2013) statement that writing teachers must carry knowledge about our students, how to teach,

and writing itself (p. 1). As a beginning teacher, I know that I need to develop in my knowledge of best practices, especially as it relates to teaching writing.

In terms of how I can develop as a teacher of writing, Fletcher provides several strategies. At the forefront is my goal to develop consistency for writing time. Fletcher (2013) suggests that “of all the writer’s habits, consistency may be the habit that matters most” (p. 129). As the teacher, I have a set amount of control over when writing occurs. However, my district does not have a writing curriculum in place. I squeeze in writing integration when I can, most commonly by assigning short response assessments that go along with our novel study in reading. Recently, I have been able to secure a 15-20 minute block for writing a few days a week, though it is worth noting that it is for text-dependent analysis writing to prepare my students for their spring standardized state tests.

Acknowledging that I do have limited resources when it comes to time and curriculum, *What a Writer Needs* gives me information on how I can make the most of this situation and still build in writing time. In Chapter 5, Fletcher describes how to implement flash-drafts in nonfiction writing. This strategy is a way for me to integrate writing into other subjects and provides an opportunity for students to apply their learning in a creative way. For example, after learning about animal structures, students can write a narrative from the perspective of a selected animal, incorporating details about how the animal’s structures support its daily life. I would provide formative feedback on both my student’s writing and their subject matter knowledge.

Another best practice from Fletcher’s book that I will implement is building a classroom environment that supports risk-taking. This is critical because taking risks allows students to outgrow themselves. I believe that risk-taking is tied into delayed gratification (for both the student and the teacher) - while risk-taking may not result in an excellent writing production

right away, trying it consistently over time will result in improvements. As the teacher, I need to have patience with this and not overstep. “A true mentor,” as Fletcher (2013) states, “will try not to penalize the student or clone a duplicate of himself” (p. 16). When I observe a student trying to take a risk in their writing, I need to know when to balance my influence and see where the child goes with this.

My goal of fostering a risk-taking environment also relates to wanting my students to avoid freezing to the face. This concept from Chapter 2 concerns a writer relying heavily on a particular skill because it was once praised. Fletcher (2013) provides an example of a student being praised for using an auditory lead which then transitions to “all of her writing begins with sound effects as she pursues additional praise” (p. 25). This example could have come from my classroom, as this has happened when I taught fifth graders. During the narrative writing unit, I taught a mini-lesson on luring leads, where many students were drawn to using onomatopoeias. I praised students on their great sound effects, but then a few students kept doing this lead for other narrative writings. Sometimes this lead did not smoothly fit into their introduction, yet I found myself trying to praise the student since I did not want to shut them down.

Going forward, however, I can conference with students on integrating different types of leads. Chapter 7 and the Appendix provide many examples of leads that I can share with my students as a way to demonstrate how they have so many at their disposal to put into their writing. In order to foster risk-taking in my classroom, I need to provide students with tools on how to take risks. This desired environment will be worthwhile because it will give students risk-taking skills that will benefit them in the short-term and the long-term.

Building consistency, integrating flash-drafts, and fostering risk-taking are all ways that I can better improve writing practice in my classroom. Fletcher also discusses ways that teachers

can improve in their instruction and interaction with students. As a mentor, I need to look at the big picture and have patience with my students as they develop their writing skills because “the fuse we light is a slow-burning one” (Fletcher, 2013, p. 19). Fletcher compares how a young writer is vulnerable to our appraisals just like how he was dependent on his midwife’s appraisal when his first child was born. Honesty and compassion go a long way in our feedback and responses to our students. By developing in my position as a mentor, especially by manifesting the mentor characteristics described in Chapter 1, my teaching practice will evolve as I grow my student’s ability and confidence in writing.

What a Writer Needs proves to be a resourceful book with takeaways that I can implement in my classroom both in the short-term and the long-term. As I read this book and reflected on how I can use it to benefit my classroom, a few questions emerged. In Chapter 2, Fletcher discusses how teachers should allow students to choose their own topics for writing. This often leads to them choosing a risky topic over a safe topic, which gives them a chance to explore themselves.

Since my school does not have a writing curriculum in place, could this be a way for me to integrate writing with a focus on risk-taking? I would use Common Core standards to help me structure a unit genre plan, such as narrative writing or opinion writing. From there, I would have my students brainstorm ideas, where they then would distinguish between safe topics and risky topics. My next steps would involve setting up mini-lessons to teach different craft moves and provide time for writer’s workshop. Jennifer Serravallo’s *The Writing Strategies Book* would be a resource for planning such mini-lessons. To get this plan going, I would also collaborate with my grade level team because I know that several of them also want to integrate more writing. Additional helpful resources would involve searching online on how other

teachers have established risk-taking writing in the classroom. Beth Moore's (2020) post "Seen, Valued, Heard: The Riskiness and Power of Teaching Personal Narrative Writing at the Start of the Year" from the *Two Writing Teachers* blog and David Rockower's (2018) article "How Telling Students My Most Difficult Story Made Me a Better Writing Teacher" from *Education Week* both provide suggestions for starting points in this endeavor.

Other questions arose while reading Chapters 3 and 12. In these chapters, Fletcher discusses taking time to talk about words and their impact. I value this concept of taking time to talk about words without necessarily attaching a formal vocabulary lesson to it. The purpose is to learn more about our language. What is a way to organically blend such a discussion into the classroom and how often do you do it?

A potential segue into it would be if I taught a mini-lesson on word choice. I have taught mini-lessons before on precise words, vivid verbs, and "said is dead" for dialogue tags, often using mentor texts for guidance. I could see these lessons stemming into a conversation on words that are intriguing to us personally. Currently, I do not assign a weekly reading log, but another way to incorporate this concept could be for a reading log to include a section for writing interesting words that pop up when students are reading their books. Students could also write out full quotes because this touches on the impact of "beautiful writing, truly original language, images that make you sit up straight when you're reading" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 144).

This then leads to a follow-up question: when my students and I discuss these words and quotes, do I keep a running list of them in our classroom? I envision hanging up chart paper for students to jot the words and quotes down, which would also help build up a community that recognizes the impact of writing and literature. Furthermore, our displayed words and quotes can include language (e.g. what Fletcher (2013) dubs "wrong but wonderful" (p. 147)) found in

our own writing, not just those found in published books. To go forward with my ideas for such a word and quote wall, I can consult with my coworkers and online resources on how other teachers have incorporated this concept into their classrooms.

Overall, *What a Writer Needs* provides approachable, resourceful guidance for teachers to have in their toolkit. With Fletcher's anecdotes and advice, I was able to reflect on my own experiences with teaching writing and on how I would like it to look in the future. I direct my students to work on their writing stamina, but at the same time thorny problems would deter me, leaving me discouraged on whether I was teaching effectively. Fletcher's writing on mentorship, strategies and craft moves (e.g. details, revision, flash-drafts, powerful words), building consistency, and creating a risk-taking writing environment is encouraging and realistic. By building these various elements into my classroom, I can do my part in furthering student writing.

References

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