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Teaching Students with Language-Based Learning Differences (LBLD) to Write: Examination of the Explicit Approach Versus Embedding Authentic Writing Into the Curricula

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Teaching Students with Language-Based Learning Differences (LBLD) to Write

Examination of the Explicit Approach Versus Embedding Authentic Writing Into the

Curricula

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Abstract

Writing is, arguably, the most difficult skill for students to master and is particularly challenging for children who have language-based learning variations. There are different schools of thought about effective writing instruction; some, like Judy Hochman, believe that writing should be taught in a systematic and explicit manner, with heavy focus on the sentence-level and building on mastery of sentence skills to move students to paragraph and compositions writing. There are others, like Ralph Fletcher, who lean more heavily on mentor texts, student choice, and embedding rich literature into the curricula, as a means to cultivate authentic writers in the classroom. Through studying and experiencing both of these philosophies first-hand, what I have found is this: effective writing instruction is not about prescribing to one approach or the other; authentic learning occurs when approaches are combined and students are taught the explicit writing skills they need while concurrently being immersed in and exposed to the rich literature that will inform their work.

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Introduction and Rationale

Written expression has emerged as one of the most vital skills required for academic, career, and social success. Through writing, we make critical first impressions, whether it be a cover letter for employment or an essay for admission into college; the quality of one's writing can shape the trajectory of a person's life. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the "ability to use written language to communicate with others—and the corresponding need for effective writing instruction and assessment—is more relevant than ever" ("The Nation's Report Card", 2012). However, the very skills that are essential for success are the same skills that are, arguably, the most difficult to master.

A national assessment of writing proficiency in 2011 found that approximately a quarter of 8th and 12th grade students in the United States are proficient in writing ("The Nation's Report Card", 2012). These results are startling, particularly given the critical nature and relevance of writing skills. Writing is a complex and multifaceted cognitive process, which includes: executive functioning, idea generation, sequencing, graphomotor skills, grammar knowledge, editing, revising, and more. A deficit in just one of these areas can impact the entire process. For the average student, writing skills are often difficult to master; however, for a student with a language-based learning difference, mastery of writing skills can feel like an insurmountable feat. Given the complexities and nuances embedded in written expression, it is no surprise that writing has become as a polarizing topic in the field. Educators and researchers have differing opinions about how writing should be taught, which seems to boil down to two approaches: teaching writing skills explicitly, in a step-by-step fashion; and embedding

authentic writing into the curricula, exposing students to rich literature through the use of, mentor texts and providing student choice. Judith Hochman--former headmaster at The Windward School, which serves students with language-based learning variations-- believes writing should be instructed in an explicit and sequential manner, focusing heavily on the sentence level and then slowly proceeding to paragraph and composition skills. Others, like Ralph Fletcher--a renowned American writer and literacy educator-- contend that writing should not be exclusively taught in such a controlled way. Instead, Fletcher explains, "You don't learn to write by going through a series of preset writing exercises. You learn to write by grappling with a real subject that truly matters to you" (Fletcher, 2013, p. 4).

I teach a class of fifth graders who all have language-based learning disabilities and I bear witness to their daily writing struggles. Even composing a basic sentence with a subject and predicate often poses a challenge. When I consider what 5th grade students in a general education are expected to achieve, I become particularly concerned. According to the New York State Standards ("English Language Arts Standards", n.d.), 5th grade students in mainstream schools are expected to, "Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly," and "Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences" ("English Language Arts Standards", n.d.). They are also expected to engage in short research projects and build their knowledge through investigation of different sources ("English Language Arts Standards", n.d.). I know with a high degree of certainty that my fifth graders are far from achieving at the level that is expected of their general education peers and, despite their learning variations, I cannot

help but wonder: How can we, as educators, do a better job of teaching students in special education how to be effective writers?

What follows is an examination of two different approaches to teach writing: explicit, skill-focused instruction; and instruction focused on authentic infusion of good writing into the curricula, such that students learn predominantly by way of exposure and modelling. Currently, my school depends heavily on the former approach: explicit and skill-based. However, I contend that what would really set students up for success would be a fusion of the two approaches, so that young learners can reap the benefits of both worlds.

Explicit Writing Instruction

Unlike language, writing is not a process that comes naturally to a child and, therefore, it must be taught. There are many facets of the writing process that can pose a challenge to any child, particularly children with language-based learning disabilities. Before a child can master a basic sentence, there are a multitude of skills that he or she must first learn, including: concept of print; letter formation; proper spacing; effective letter sizing; and more. These skills are not acquired through osmosis, and do require a great deal of practice. Once a child has a handle on the basic skills needed to write, Judith Hochman (2017) would argue that the very first place to start is at the sentence level.

According to Hochman (2017), the sentence is the building block of writing and, without mastery of sentence composition, a student cannot truly master the writing process. What Hochman began to notice was that students were encountering great difficulty transferring their ideas onto paper; a clear line of thought in their heads would often emerge as a fragmented and disconnected piece of writing. Hochman determined

that one of the main issues was that teachers were giving writing assignments without explicitly teaching students *how* to write (Hochman & Wexler, 2017). She explains that young students are often expected to write too much too soon, without having been taught the skills they need to be successful (Hochman & Wexler, 2017). And, when students enter high school, they are typically tasked with analytical writing assignments, when, all they have written up until that point have been narratives about their own lives (Hochman & Wexler, 2017). A clear misalignment between academic expectations and the actual instruction began to emerge and Hochman developed what she believed would be an effective solution: The Hochman Approach (Hochman & Wexler, 2017).

Hochman's (2017) approach focuses heavily on the sentence level at the outset and teaches writing in a sequential and explicit manner, building on previously learned skills to foster progress through the writing continuum. According to Hochman (2017), "When students have the opportunity to learn strategies and practice them through carefully scaffolded activities, they become better at understanding what they read, expressing themselves orally, and thinking critically" (p.3). She challenges the sole use of mentor texts, explaining that while some students might be able to appreciate hearing good writing, they may not be able to emulate it independently; she articulates that only through deliberate and continuous practice will writing proficiency occur. Hochman (2017) contends that, "For [students], the techniques of good writing are a secret code they just can't crack" (p.7).

The Hochman Approach is based upon six principles, the first of which is, "Students need explicit instruction in writing, beginning in the Early Elementary Grades" (Hochman & Wexler, 2017, p. 8). Hochman describes how many students often write the

way they speak, something I have seen over and over in my own classroom. Their written

sentences tend to ramble on, with glaring grammatical and syntactical errors, that might

be accepted in oral communication with facial expressions and hand motions that one

uses to supplement communication. In order to address these issues, Hochman purports

that schools have to begin teaching explicit writing skills in the elementary grades

(Hochman & Wexler, 2017). She explains that students' writing will not improve if we

simply give them a half hour each day to just write (Hochman & Wexler, 2017). In this

way, she believes that students will end up repeating the same mistakes without learning

the skills they need to improve their work (Hochman & Wexler, 2017). Instead, she

explains that young learners require very specific writing exercises that aim to enhance

particular skills and strategies with which they are not yet proficient (Hochman &

Wexler, 2017).

  As Hochman (2017) discusses the six principles of her approach, she emphasizes

the importance of embedding writing skills into the curricula, rather than making a

seperate writing skills block. She explains that, all too often, teachers carve out a specific

writing period in which students are tasked with writing about their own personal

experiences or opinions, rather than using the actual content they are learning in social

studies, reading, or science. Hochman argues that in order to truly enhance writing

instruction, students have to be putting their writing skills to use across academic topics,

even at a young age. In doing so, Hochman believes that writing skills will therefore

become more generalized throughout all academic areas, rather than being isolated to a

specific writing block.

Having taught writing using the Hochman Approach for the last three years, I have witnessed both its benefits and its shortcomings. On the one hand, I do agree that, particularly for students with language-based learning disabilities, it is critical to use an explicit and systematic approach when teaching basic writing skills. This year, for instance, many of students did not know how to write a proper sentence at the beginning of September. They truly did not understand that a sentence is one complete thought with a subject and a predicate. Instead, when asked to write, they would often put periods in completely arbitrary places, splitting sentences up into fragments. For these students, simply reading their work back to them and asking them to "listen" to whether or not it made sense, was also difficult. These are children who have acute language-based variations, so expressive and receptive language pose serious challenges. Therefore, Hochman has been quite valuable and effective.

As Hochman prescribes, we began with the basics: comparing fragments to complete sentences (see appendix #1). After much review, students were able to properly identify fragments and sentences, and even able to fix fragments by adding the missing element (either subject or predicate). However, what remained challenging was getting students to produce complete sentences on their own. When given a short sentence to expand--what Hochman refers to as a "kernel sentence"--students eventually learned how to use question words to add details. For instance, they might see "The boy ran." and then answer the questions "where?", "when?", and "how?" to produce the following, expanded sentence: "Yesterday, the boy quickly ran home." As an educator, I did see the value in these types of activities, which are attempting to promote more sophisticated and interesting writing. However, even after all the worksheets and explicit practice, my

students still found it difficult to produce complete and expanded sentences independently. What I noticed is that students seemed to lack the ability to transfer writing skills they had learned in isolation into their own writing.

I've also experienced firsthand how writing skills work can be incorporated across curricula, and I do see the benefit in that, as well. For instance, when teaching my students about the conjunctions "but," "because," and "so," I would often give them sentence stems to complete in social studies and reading class in order to practice using the conjunctions properly. As a social studies warm up, I might ask the students to complete the following sentence stem, "English settlers tried to establish their first successful colony at Roanoke, **but**……." Here, students have to utilize their understanding of the conjunction "but," realizing that it indicates a change in direction, and they also have to tap into their prior knowledge about what happened at Roanoke. As a teacher, it's an effective way to assess both their writing skills and their content knowledge. I've seen this used in math, too, when a teacher might give their students the following sentence stem, "Multiplication and division are related **because**……", which, again allows the educator to assess both writing skills and mathematical knowledge.

What I've continued to observe, though, is a lack of internalization and generalization of skills. Across the last three years, I've seen the following trend: students can successfully complete worksheet after worksheet, placing an "F" next to a fragment and an "S" next to a complete sentence; and they can complete sentence stems with "but", "because", and "so"; however, when it comes time for them to produce a complete and well-thought out sentence on their own, it remains difficult. Even in February of this year, after months of sentence skill review, I continue to see students writing sentences

like the following, "Having a competition with my sister." When I read this particular phrase back to my student and asked her if it sounded right, she said yes. This speaks to my prior point about how challenges with both expressive and receptive language are at play here and we have to do something more in order to truly help these students emerge as effective writers.

So, what can we do? Well, I would argue that teaching explicit writing skills is simply not enough. I agree with Hochman that learning how to write is not something that just happens through exposure; however, basing writing instruction solely on skill practice renders it void of meaning. Students--whether they have language-based learning variations or not--deserve to feel passionate about what they are writing and to be exposed to rich literature that models for them what good writing looks and sounds like. Of course, we cannot depend on this alone; simply reading a good book to children does not always mold them into good writers . But I contend that it is not an either or, but a both! Why not teach students the explicit writing skills they need to be successful, while simultaneously tapping into their respective interests and offering them opportunities to engage in writing that will move and captivate them? What follows is an examination of how to infuse authentic writing into the curricula, in a way that engages and excites young minds.

Embedding Authentic Writing Into Curricula

Ralph Fletcher (2017) purports that the key to writing instruction is actually rather simple, stating that students must write every single day. From Fletcher's vantage point, writing is a critical foundation of the work done within the classroom, and he explains that students are not really taught to write, but, rather, teach themselves by merely

existing in a community of writers from whom they can learn. Fletcher (2017) says, "Even with a 'bad' piece of writing, a good teacher will reach into the chaos, find a place where the writing works, pull it form the wreckage, name it, and make the writer aware of his or her emerging skill with no words" (p.14).

Fletcher (2017) also suggests that in order to set a positive tener in the room, it is critical that teachers join their students in the writing process. As the children write, he says, teachers should write alongside them. This helps establish that writing is important to the teacher, too; that the teacher is also trying to improve his or her work; and that the teacher finds pleasure in writing. Having an educator share his or her work along with the students is also an effective way to help establish a trusting and thoughtful community of writers who support each other and offer considerate feedback, rather than judgment.

So how do students learn the skills they need to be successful? Fletcher (2017) explains that much of this occurs through brief mini-lessons and one-on-one conferring between the student and the teacher. A mini-lesson should be 5-7 minutes long, in which the educator teaches a specific writing skill on which she would like the students to focus that day. She then offers them 30-40 minutes of sustained writing time during which the students practice the particular skill, and ends with 10-12 minutes to share within the classroom writing community. During the 30-40 minutes of writing, the teacher also confers with individual students, helping to guide them in the right direction and offering helpful feedback that will enhance the quality of their writing.

One of the keys, Fletcher (2017) says, about the 30-40 minutes of sustained writing is the element of **choice**. He explains that, "Giving young writers genuine choice is the best way I know how to create an environment where they can flourish" (2017,

p.53). By allowing students to choose the topic about which they are writing, it allows them to feel empowered and in control. It also gives them the opportunity to choose details, word choice, tone, organization, and much more. There are certainly some children for whom making this kind of choice can be daunting; therefore, Fletcher suggests having students develop what he called an "idea list", which is a living document to which they add throughout the year. The list will contain myriad ideas about which they can write at any given time, providing an immediately accessible resource that will help to prevent writer's block.

Towards the end of Fletcher's book, *The Writing Teacher's Companion*, he says something that resonated deeply with me: "No writer can work in a vacuum. That's why all writers are readers. They have to be. And your students are no different. They need to hear language used skillfully by master writers" (2017, p.75). The time devoted to writing within a classroom should be, in part, devoted to *listening* to and *reading* good writing, in the way of a book, poem, song lyrics, or anything else that models interesting structure, technique, style, and word choice. Fletcher articulates that reading aloud to one's students is one of the most critical ways to help them see what good writing looks and sounds like. He strongly suggests selecting texts that can be read in one sitting, like picture books, passages, and brief articles. Doing a read aloud to model good writing is not *just* about reading aloud; it's much more than that. In order to help students understand what makes a piece of writing particularly good, teachers must have a conversation with their students to encourage them to make observations and to react to what they have heard. Teachers can help facilitate this process by pointing out specific elements of the writing that they would like students to notice, and posing questions such as, "Why do you think the

author chose to write it this way?" or "What surprised you about the way the author wrote this?" In this way, the educator is helping to genuinely engage students with the writing and inviting them to step into the writer's shoes.

This brings me to the concept of mentor texts, which, I believe, should have a place in every classroom around the world. In *Writing with Mentors*, Allison Marchetti and Rebeka O'Dell explain that, "Mentor texts are pieces of writing--or excerpts of writing--by established authors that can inspire students and teach them how to write, and they have become the single most important element of our writing instruction" (p.3). As the authors describe, mentor texts do more than just model good writing; they offer a critical way for students to find inspiration, to learn about a variety of craft elements, to foster creativity and idea generation, and they provide teachers with a way to access all different kinds of writers in the room through one, single text. And, what's more: teachers can--and should--use student writing as mentor texts, too. This is a fantastic way to foster pride and to expose students to the work their peers have done.

One of the key facets of properly using mentor texts is inviting students to engage in the text by thinking like writers. By listening to a text through the prism of a writer, students are can uncover specific aspects of the writing that make it rich. In this way, children are encouraged to *study* good writing, rather than simply doing worksheets or being asked to write without a given purpose. Marchetti and O'Dell (2015) corroborate Fletcher's point about choice when they, too, emphasize the importance of giving students the room and opportunity to select the topic about which they would like to write. They say that when students are forced to write about a particular topic, their writing often becomes "dishonest and removed from the true purposes of writing" (2015,

p.5). Allowing students to choose is an extremely powerful tool: it enables children to discover what is important to them and provides a sense of agency in their own learning.

Choice does not--and should not--begin and end with writing topics. It can extend to the actual mentor texts that are read in the classroom. Allowing students to request specific texts to be read aloud to the class is yet another way to help them feel empowered and heard. When students are old enough, they can begin to use mentor texts independently, reading them and studying them on their own. There are endless possibilities when it comes to using mentor texts and the important thing is knowing how and when to use them.

Merging the Two Approaches and Original Content

I believe that the Hochman Approach can be truly useful, particularly for students who have great writing and language-related difficulties. Telling a student who lacks foundational skills and struggles to compose a sentence to simply write for 30 minutes, will not magically turn that child into a proficient writer; on the flip side, focusing solely on writing skills and giving worksheet after worksheet lacks, as Fletcher explains, authentic purpose. It sucks the meaning out of writing and renders it a burden to be dreaded, rather than an opportunity to express, examine, and reflect. The question, therefore, becomes: how do we merge teaching explicit writing skills with embedding authentic writing, choice, and exposure to rich literature into the curricula? I am here to tell you that it can--and should--be done!

One meaningful way that I have merged explicit and authentic writing instruction is through a program called **mentor sentences**, developed by Ideas by Jivey (Ivey, n.d.). The concept of mentor sentences is to expose students to good writing, at the sentence

level, that facilitates grammar and parts of speech instruction, and encourages students to study writing in the ways that Marchetti and O'Dell (2015) suggest. What is appealing about this program is that it focuses exclusively on the sentence--which is precisely what my students need at this juncture--and does so in a meaningful way. The program works as follows: on Monday, students are given the mentor sentence of the week and one student volunteers to read it aloud. Once the sentence is read, students spend time studying the sentence and share their observations, trying to assess why the teacher selected that particular sentence for the week. Students notice elements such as word choice, structure, interesting parts of speech, tone, and more. As observations are shared, students write them down in their writer's notebook. On Tuesday, students rewrite the sentence in their notebook and identify all the parts of speech that they possibly can. This helps reinforce parts of speech and draws their attention to the different functions of a word depending on where it is in a sentence. For instance in "I have a diamond necklace," the word diamond is an adjective, describing the necklace; however, in "That diamond is so large," the word diamond is a noun. We take time to unpack these nuances, which helps solidify students' understanding of parts of speech in a meaningful way. On Wednesday, students revise the sentence in an attempt to enhance the writing. This gives us the opportunity to explicitly work on revision techniques and immediately gives students the chance to practice those skills. They work hard on selecting words to replace with more vivid verbs or adjectives, and look for places where they can add more detail to make the sentence pop. At the end of the mentor sentences block, students are excited to share their revised products, helping to create a supportive community of writers to which Fletcher (2017) refers. And finally, on Thursday, students are tasked with writing

their very own sentence based upon the mentor sentence of the week. For instance, if the mentor sentence used a metaphor, then they must use a metaphor in their writing; if the mentor sentence used quotation marks, then students have incorporate dialogue into their sentence; and, if the mentor sentence included vivid verbs and adjectives, then the children have to include vivid verbs and adjectives in their work. When solely using The Hochman Approach, I noticed that, despite doing many worksheets in which they were asked to identify a sentence versus a fragment, and activities in which they were told to fix fragments, they still, nevertheless, had great difficulty composing a complete sentence on their own. To the contrary, mentor sentences has helped my students internalize foundational writing skills and, whatsmore, it has also helped them understand how to make their writing more interesting and personally relevant.

The writing that my students have produced while studying a new mentor sentence each week has been more sophisticated than any writing I've seen across my last three years at this school. I think that Mentor Sentences is, in many ways, the perfect combination of explicit writing instruction paired with exposure to authentic written work that gives the process meaning. At the end of the week, students are exciting to compose their own writing and are equally as excited to share it with their peers. They also know that I will be selecting three sentence stars of the week (see appendix #3) and work hard to achieve this status (every student is selected as a sentence star at some point during the year.) The program also offers students an element of choice, within a solidified structure, as they are given the chance to compose their own sentences about anything they would like, as long as they use whatever facet of the sentence we were focusing on that week (e.g., metaphor, vivid word choice, etc.) And lastly, what is perhaps the most

fun component of the mentor sentence program is when I read aloud the book from where the sentence actually came. This is a special time for us every Friday, as students listen carefully to the read aloud, attempting to identify the mentor sentence embedded in the story.

In addition to mentor sentences, I have made an effort to use captivating picture books to inspire my students' writing. Fletcher (2017) articulates well that, "The writing in a classroom can only be as good as the literature that supports and surrounds and buoys it up" (p.16). With this in mind, I strive to identify texts that will, indeed, bolster my students' writing and speak to their interests. Most recently, I stumbled upon piece called *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mrs. Morris Lessmore* (Joyce, W., 2012), by William Joyce, and knew immediately that this piece had a place in my classroom. Based on a short film, this book follows the protagonist--Morris--on a magical journey as he is guided to a fantastical library that changes his life forever. Filled with captivating word choice, beautiful illustrations, figurative language, and interesting text features, this book seemed like a perfect mentor text for my students.

Prior to reading the story, I did a brief review of vivid verbs and adjectives, on which we had spent a great deal of time thus far, since they often appeared in our mentor sentences. Students were able to successfully generate and identify vivid verbs and adjectives, and they explained their usefulness within a given text (e.g., how they are helpful tools to encourage the reader to visualize the story). After this review, I handed out a vivid verbs and adjectives "bank" and asked students to listen to the story carefully and jot down the most interesting vivid verbs and adjectives they heard. My students were excited about their mission, as most of them sat up in their chairs and made sure to

have a freshly sharpened pencil in their hands. While I read and displayed the stunning

illustrations, students were entranced by the story and eagerly writing down words that

piqued their interest. By asking them to listen for something specific, it seemed to

provide a clear purpose, which, in turn, enhanced their engagement.

As I read aloud, I made a point to stop at certain words that I, myself, found

interesting, modelling for my students what I hoped they would be doing on their own.

For instance, towards the end of the book, the author describes the protagonist as

"stooped and crinkly", and I paused there for a moment to share how I admired that

description. I asked my students why they thought this was a more effective portrayal

than simply describing the man as old, and they were able to explain that using words

such as these helps us imagine what the character really looked like. I read on and

continued to pause at interesting words and moments in the story, whereby I was truly

inviting my students to *study* the text in the way that Marchetti and O'Dell (2015)

suggest. They were not simply passive listeners; instead, they became writing detectives,

listening carefully and actively to a story that would, hopefully, inform their own written

work.

When the book came to a close, we took time as a class to review the words that

students collected. I charted their vivid verbs and adjectives, which included words such

as: scattered, wander, festive, urged, extraordinary, mysterious, and fluttering. Students

were eager to share their findings and clearly felt accomplished by their ability to identify

interesting words within the story. Once our list was complete, I tasked my students with

a writing assignment. I told them they were to use the list of vivid words we had just

compiled to write a story with the following prompt: " A student opened a book, and all

of a sudden…" They could write about anything they wanted, as long as it began with that phrase and incorporated some of the vivid adjectives and verbs that we had identified as a class. In this way, I was giving them an element of choice, which, as Fletcher (2017) explains, is critical when it comes to successful writing. However, for those who have more difficulty with complete writing freedom, I was also providing some structure in which they had to operate by giving a prompt, the bank of words, and reading the mentor text prior to the writing task.

Before students got to work, I gave them the option of using a Hochman (2017) tool: the **Single-Paragraph Outline**. This is a pre-writing tool that according to Hochman (2017), "Provides students with a road map they can follow to plan the beginning, middle, and end of a unified, coherent paragraph" (p.84) The Single-Paragraph Outline gives students the opportunity to craft a complete topic and concluding sentence, and to jot down notes about the details within their paragraph. Up until this point, we had done a great deal of explicit writing skills work that focused on generating topic sentences and subsequent details that clearly related back to the topic sentence, so this outline provided an opportunity for students to practice the skills on which they had been working. However, given the creative nature of this writing assignment, the Single-Paragraph Outline did not work for everyone.

When given the choice, there were, indeed, some students who opted to use the outline, clearly benefiting from the organization it provided. However, there were other students who decided to draw out their story first, and then begin to write based on the illustrations they created. And lastly, there were students for whom the most effective option was to simply dive in and write, since they had already started to generate a story

in their heads. (This demonstrated impressive metacognition and an awareness on the part of the students about what tools work for them.) What is key, I believe, is to provide the necessary differentiation and tools so that each student gets what he or she needs to be and feel successful. It is not necessary to force all students to use the Single-Paragraph Outline if that is not the tool that works best for them. As educators, it's critical that we recognize how different students have different needs, whether in writing, or in any other academic subject. As Fletcher (2017) explains, "Everybody is different, so anybody who sits down to write should feel free to customize the process to suit his or her particular needs and preferences" (p.97).

As students worked, I observed a notable difference in their affect and demeanor, compared to when they are tasked with writing skills worksheets. And I attribute this to how Fletcher (2017) describes just how important it is to allow students to write about something that moves them. Yes, I did provide a prompt that I asked all students to follow, but I also gave them the choice of taking their respective stories in any direction they chose; from that choice stemmed a level of excitement that was truly tangible within the room. Students were calling me over as they worked, eager to show me what they had developed thus far, writing pages and pages as their stories were unfolding. While I walked around the room, I saw that there were, indeed, many grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, and syntactical inaccuracies; however, before I became distressed, I took a moment and asked myself: what is my goal here? As I contemplated that question, I realized that my goal for this particular assignment was to foster a sense of enjoyment about writing and to give students the opportunity they deserved to feel like accomplished authors. And, all the while, reinforcing the importance of vivid word

choice, which they were, in fact, incorporating into their stories. Therefore, in that sense, the goal was being achieved, and I was able to diffuse any sense of stress while giving them a chance to make their voices heard.

It is important to note that while students wrote, they referred to a few Hochman posters that are displayed on my writing bulletin board, including, for instance, a poster with helpful transition words. This tool has come in quite handy, as students write and contemplate how to move from one thought to the next. They can simply look up and see words such as then, next, finally, soon, and additionally, which is tremendously helpful to them in their own writing, Therefore, Hochman was once again incorporated in a way that was helpful to many of the students in the room.

Once students were finished with their stories, they worked one-on-one with a teacher to edit and publish their final drafts. Again, the goal of this particular assignment was not to perfect editing and revising skills, and therefore, I felt it was appropriate to have students complete those steps of the writing process under the guidance of a teacher. When their stories were ready to be published, we had a class celebration during which students read their work aloud. There was not a single student who shied away from this opportunity; and, in fact, it was quite the opposite. The children were thrilled to have the chance to read what they had written and I was moved by how wonderful my students acted as audience members, too. They listened attentively and offered positive praise, truly fostering the community of writers to which Ralph Fletcher often refers. (See appendix #2).

A few days after our class celebration, I had an idea: what if we created a story mash-up and created a video in which each student read a few lines of their work to

create one, interesting tale? I asked the students what they thought and they were thrilled. Together, we worked on creating a script and someone from our technical team helped us make the film. By incorporating students in this process, I was continuing to give them an element of choice, as they selected which lines to include. When the video was complete, my class was so proud to show off their work. We hosted a viewing in our room and sent the video around so that everyone could enjoy it. The pride that students felt was palpable and truly unparalleled.

This creative writing project was one of the first times that I witnessed the true power of choice and the potential of combining Hochman resources, a mentor text, and the writer's workshop model. With this in mind, I contemplated other ways to combine explicit writing instruction and Hochman tools with an element of choice, while tapping into students' interests. Across the last few months, my students have been exploring the subject of social justice, investigating many different moments of justice and injustice across American history. At the forefront of many of these discussions emerged conversations about stereotypes and biases that tend to color our perspectives and impact how we treat others. Students were endlessly intrigued by the idea of stereotypes, so I was thrilled when I came across an opportunity to combine explicit writing instruction with their interest in this topic.

What I stumbled upon was a lesson on compound sentences and a way to counter stereotypes and the single story. The concept was to teach students explicitly how to compose compound sentences with the conjunctions "but" and "and", while giving them the opportunity to tell their own stories and make their voices heard. At the outset, we reviewed as a class the concept of a stereotype and different stereotypes with which

students were familiar. And what was so remarkable was that their knowledge was robust, which indicated to me that A.) they had heard many biases in their short lives and/or B.) perhaps they had been the victims of stereotyping themselves. When we reviewed stereotypes about children, for instance, they had much to share, including: children are rude; they are loud; they are stupid; they are immature; they are self-centered; and more. We also discussed stereotypes about women, and men, about which their knowledge was equally considerable.

After we reviewed, we then watched a video called "I am Asian, but I'm Not….", in which people used compound sentences to address stereotypes. For instance, one person said, "I am Asian, but I am over six feet tall" addressing head on the stereotype that permeates our society (BuzzFeed, 2015). The people in the video also used the conjunction "and" to combat the single story, by saying, for instance, "I am Asian, and I am also a professional cyclist," indicating how she is defined by more than just her ethnicity (BuzzFeed, 2015). At the end of the video, viewers are urged not to let stereotypes define them, by using compound sentences to do so.

Students were moved by the video and, before I had them do this on their own, I explicitly modelled how to use the conjunctions "but" and "and" to develop these kinds of anti-stereotype sentences. I used myself as an example, and showed them, for instance, a sentence I wrote that said, "I am Jewish, but I do not have dark curly hair," and "I am a woman, but I was the captain of the varsity tennis team." I also demonstrated how to use "and" by showing them, for example, "I am a teacher and I am a wife," and "I am an athlete and I am a student." We discussed how to properly use these conjunctions and then was time for them to do this on their own.

Therefore, after the explicit instruction--which was, more or less, Hochman style--students were given an opportunity to tell their own stories within the structure of a particular assignment. They were tasked with creating at least one sentence with "but" and one with "and", and what they generated was quite profound. Students clearly internalized the meaning of these conjunctions and were able to generate sentences independently, after seeing the video and watching me model for them. What was notable, too, was the fact that students did not want to stop at just two sentences; instead, they asked if they could write more! They were excited by the opportunity to make their voices heard and to use the writing skills on which we had worked.

When students completed the assignment, they were thrilled to share what they had developed, continuing to enhance our community of writers. After sharing, we posted their sentences outside of our classroom for others to see, and something incredible happened: other classes wanted to participate, too. Teachers and students stopped at our anti-stereotypes wall and asked how they, too, could contribute. Over time, other classes added their sentences to the wall, and what emerged was powerful and profound, all stemming from the compound sentence. It became increasingly clear to me that giving students a voice and even a small element of choice can truly make a world of difference. (See appendix #4).

Reflection and Conclusion

As I reflect on this work, there are a few key takeaways woven through the last twenty or so pages. One key concept is the idea that we do not have to choose one, single approach to teach writing. From my perspective, it is best practice to pull from more than one approach in order to provide students with the foundational skills they need, while

exposing them to the rich literature that will help inform their work. What I have found to be troubling is when a school prescribes to one, single approach, thereby preventing students from reaching their full potential. By using, for instance, only the Hochman approach, I fear that we run the risk of making writing into something that is void of meaning and excitement. When students are drilled over and over again, they are not given any agency in their own learning, no choice in their writing, and zero opportunity to tell their own stories. A friend made a powerful analogy about this recently: she explained that by exclusively keeping students in skill work, it's akin to learning the scales in music and never being able to play a song. Who wants to play scales for the rest of their lives? Yes, students need foundational writing skills in order to write; however, we do not have to teach them explicit writing skills to the exclusion of everything else. Magical things happen when we embed authentic writing into our curricula and invite students to truly study and investigate good writing. And, I believe that skillwork and opportunities for authentic writing can be done concurrently; it does not necessarily have to be sequential. We can teach students, for instance, how to write a proper topic sentence using Hochman techniques, and simultaneously give them the chance to use a writer's notebook or compose a story that make their voices heard.

As I consider the work I have done in my own classroom, I am, indeed, proud of the ways that I've embedded both explicit writing instruction and exposure to rich literature into my curricula. However, there are, of course, things that I would consider doing differently as I move forward. I have seen, firsthand, the incredible impact that the mentor sentences program has had on my students. One important element that this program has really addressed is the transfer of skills. After months of being exposed to a

different mentor sentence each week, my students have arrived at a place where they can each generate a complete sentence independently, which is something I was not seeing when I prescribed to Hochman to the exclusion of everything else. This transfer of skill is absolutely critical.

However, there are students in my classroom who continue to have low self esteem around writing and, specifically, when it comes to the mentor sentences block. One strategy I could consider using next year is previewing the mentor sentence with these students before showing it to the entire class, in order to help familiarize them with the writing early on. By pre-teaching the sentence to some students, it would, hopefully, encourage even the shyest and least confidence writers in the room to engage in the content and make them more comfortable generating their own sentence at the end of the week. For the students who continue to have difficulty composing their own sentence, I could consider adding in an extra scaffold by providing precisely the number of words they should include and/or giving them a sentence starter to get them going. Alternatively, I could meet one-on-one with students to orally rehearse their sentences and then inviting them to write. The hope, though, would be to slowly take these scaffolds away, such that all students are able to independently generate their own sentences by the end of the year.

The engagement and excitement I observed during our writing project based on *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* (Joyce, W., 2012), was truly exceptional. There was virtually no other writing assignment throughout the year that promoted such exhilaration around writing as did this task. However, as I consider what I might do differently in the future, I cannot help but wonder what would have happened if

I took the prompt away entirely? Rather than telling students they had to begin their stories with "A student opened a book, and all of a sudden," I would allow them to begin their work in whatever way they chose and am curious to see what they would produce. I'm certain that there are some students would revel in this greater level of freedom and, of course, there would remain others who continue to need more individualized support and guidance, which we would provide. Though, I think that removing the prompt might allow students' voice to emerge even more.

In the spirit of choice and authenticity, I would also like to introduce a writer's notebook in my classroom next year. My hope is that by giving each student a specific space where they can write freely without fear of being judged or ridiculed, they will be more inclined to take risks and play with words in a way that, perhaps, they wouldn't if simply prescribed each and every writing assignment. I want my learners to have a place where they can write whatever comes to their mind, whether it be a list of words they find interesting; a short story inspired by something that happened to them that day; or an imaginative tale that they develop over time. As Fletcher describes, the writer's notebook is intended to be a place where students can react to the things that happen to them in their daily lives and it can--and should--look different from student to student. According to Fletcher (1996), "A writer's notebook is like a ditch--an empty space you dig in your busy life, a space that will fill up with all sorts of fascinating little creatures. If you dig it, they will come. **You'll be amazed by what you catch there**" (p. 1).

So, after all this, what is my critical takeaway? Well, after everything that I have learned about the intricacies of writing and how it should or should not be taught, my lasting thought is this: every student has a story to tell--a voice to be heard-- and it is our

job, as educators, to ascertain how best to provide a platform from which children can authentically express themselves. My hunch is that this cannot be done exclusively through explicit instruction, nor can it be achieved by using only mentor texts. Instead, what I have found, is that the best writing instruction, greatest student joy, and most authentic engagement occurs when the two approaches are combined: when students are taught the foundational skills they need, while concurrently exposed to rich literature, given opportunities for choice and, more generally, provided the platform to make their voices heard. This is indeed the magic sauce.

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Appendix #1

Name:_____   Date:_____

Sentence or Fragment?

Directions: If the group of words is a complete sentence, write **"S"** for sentence. If the group of words is not a complete sentence, write **"F"** for fragment. Circle whether the fragment is missing a **who** or **did what**.

_____1. Ms. Moskowitz and Ms. Strauss

who   did what

_____2. She taught the class.

who   did what

_____3. Jumped over the table

who   did what

_____4. The telephone rang.
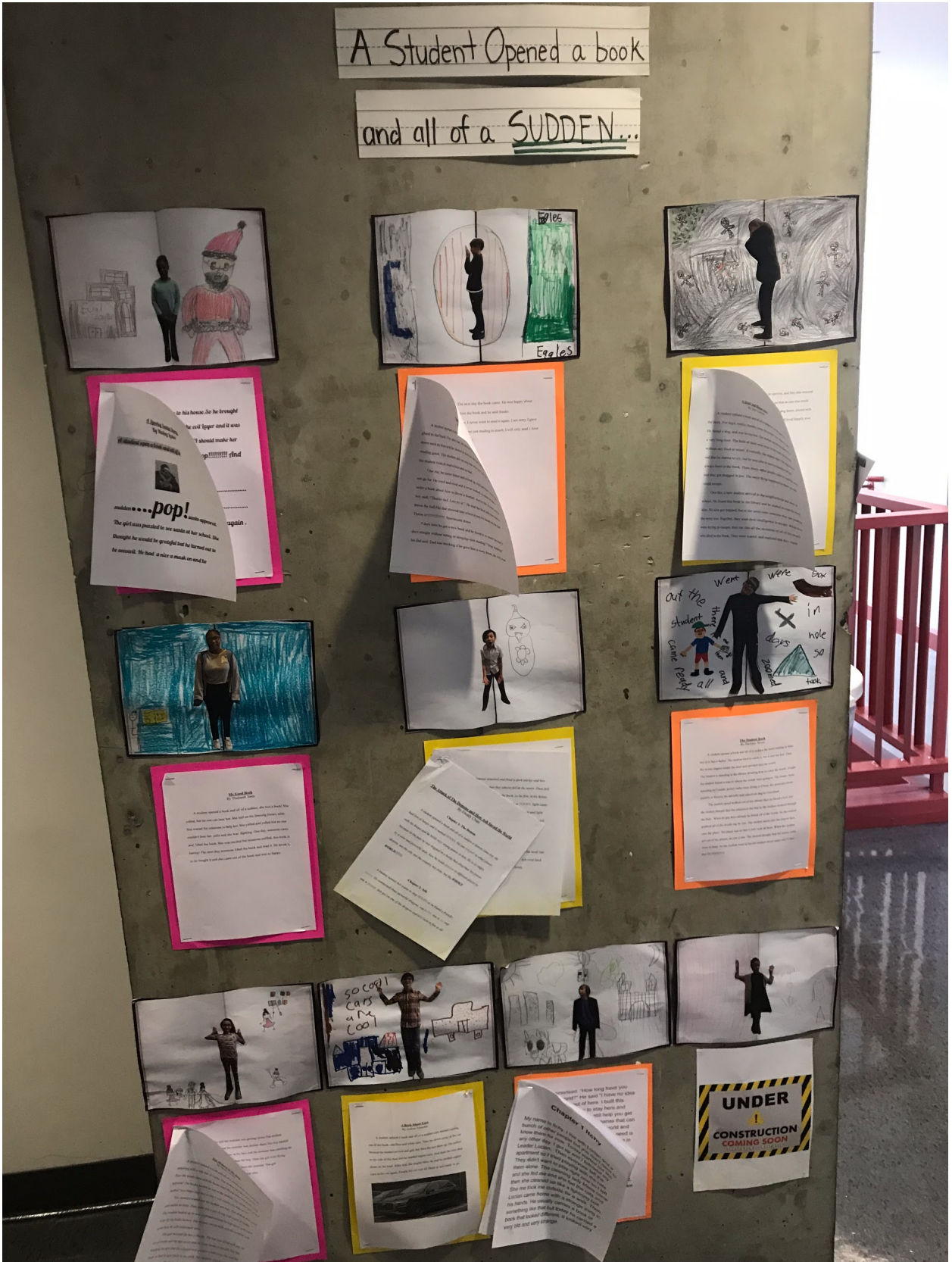
who   did what

_____5. Sang a song

who   did what

_____6. Little babies sleep.

who   did what

_____7. swam in the sea

who   did what

_____8. I was eating a chicken wing.

who   did what

Appendix #2

Appendix #3

Sentence Stars

Monday

Write down what you **notice** about the sentence. Do you see any **exciting words, interesting language,** or **special parts of speech**? Write down whatever you think is interesting!

Tuesday

Verb   adjective   Noun

Rewrite the mentor sentence in your writer's notebook and leave a space in between each line. Label all the **parts of speech** you know!

Wednesday

Revise the sentence by making it more descriptive or exciting. Try changing verbs, adjective, or nouns, but keep the meaning of the sentence the same!

Thursday

Imitate the sentence by making your own based on the style and structure of the original sentence. You should create a brand new sentence!

LUCIAN BOGEN

Ms. Strauss had a heart of gold, but others found her annoying because she danced by the fire making it shoot ashes out with a BOOM!

ZACHARY WOOD

I can throw it like a quarterback or a pitcher and marvel at the blurry ball zooming past me, as it flew out of the stadium.

LUCIAN BOGEN

I can play dragons with Stoic, or just chase him around the room and marvel at his speed & agility as he lands with a BOOM!

MARK ADJMI

I can sit back and marvel at Saquon Barkley's speed or I can go to a game and cheer away like I never did before.

THAILANDI TANIS

I can read a book or marvel at my mom read with lots of emotion and sip on my hot chocolate making a slurping sound.

SAVANNAH RANDLE

I can wear it like a giant gold ring, or just soar above it and gaze at it's shimmering beauty.

HAILEY LESTER

After Spring came, the juicy apples fell from the enormous tree and landed in tiny buckets.

LIBRARIAN
Responsibilities
Keep record of books checked out, organize library, take books to library
SALARY: 550

TECHNOLOGY SUPERVISOR
Responsibilities
Assist with any technology task and turn on/off the lights

ASSISTANT
Responsibilities
Teachers right hand aid

MESSENGER
Responsibilities
Deliver written or spoken messages to people throughout the building

S
Res

TEACHING STUDENTS WITH LBLD TO WRITE

Appendix #4

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