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INCLUSIVE TEACHING GUIDE

Introduction

Two years ago, while I was engrossed in my own private study of English education, I read a book which revolutionized the way I thought about teaching English and language arts. But I should back up first and describe where I was at before I explain where I wish to go.

Like most teachers, I suppose, I theoretically modeled my future classroom on the practices that I had been witness to. For English, this generally meant that the class read a certain text, the teacher engaged in mostly lecture-style analysis of that text, and the students wrote some sort of formal paper on it, or took some "objective" test meant to ensure that the reading had actually been done—in most cases, it was fairly sufficient to read the Cliff's Notes to pass. As a lifetime avid reader, I did not necessarily dislike this method since I was able to read interesting texts, but I was more often than not quite bored in class. Since this method was all I had ever really experienced—even in college, where the lecture-style dominated—I didn't really think about alternatives. So I modeled my future classroom somewhat on these practices, with the understanding that I would be far more interesting than my teachers. While my view did not change overnight, this one book caused me to reevaluate everything I thought I knew.

The book—*In the Middle,* by Nanci Atwell—advocates a student-centered classroom which is known widely as a reading-writing workshop (RWW). In a nutshell,

the RWW de-emphasizes formal teacher instruction in favor of small group or one-on-one contacts. Basically, the teacher sets up the criteria for the class and delivers "mini-lessons" on reading and writing strategies and rules that students need. However, most of these lessons are not delivered to the whole class since it is rare that an entire class of students will have the same writing issues or problems. Also, the teacher is not the only one delivering instruction. Instead, s/he informally directs students to help each other out so that resources are maximized. Most of the actual class time is devoted to working on student writing, although students can be engaged in any variety of assignments since it is essentially their choice of what to work on, within a range of options, so long as they satisfy the criteria of the class.

The RWW is appropriate and beneficial to special education students because its emphasis on individual needs allows a teacher adjust his/her instruction strategies per student. In effect, the RWW essentially treats *all* students as if they were students with special needs because the teacher is forced to individualize most of the instruction. Thus, there is the added benefit of reducing the attention drawn to special needs students because the teacher meets with so many of the students on a daily basis, resulting in less negative stigma.

This guide will explain the strategies and procedures of the RWW as a tool for inclusive teachers, and will detail the benefits to special needs students when a language arts class is run in this manner.

Partnering with Parents

The first, most crucial aspect of conducting in terms of parental involvement with a RWW is to disseminate concise information about just what exactly a RWW is. This is particularly salient because parents in most cases will be completely unfamiliar with the practice, even those who happen to be teachers themselves. This is best done either just before or just after school begins so that parents can have time to process the information before their children are thrust into an unfamiliar and confusing (at first) environment.

The first letter home should explain the components of a RWW and should stress student responsibility and participation above all else. Thus, parents will know up front that their children will have to take initiative for their own learning. This will happen most effectively when parents take an active interest in what the students are learning. Parents should ask their children what they are currently working on in class and what they might work on next. They are also encouraged to help their children with editing, grammar, spelling, etc., so that the students may receive help from more sources.

This letter should further explain that parents that express anxiety about writing because of their own perceived deficiencies should relax and realize that practically any input they can provide is valuable because they are taking an active role in their child's writing. Just because a parent has trouble spelling, for instance, should not prevent him/her from reading over what his/her child has written and comment on the subject or the focus of a piece of writing.

Parents will also be invited to come to class to participate (not simply observe!) in the RWW. This will allow parents to have a better grasp of the procedures and processes of the RWW, and will provide the students with another adult who can provide, at the

very least, a critical audience for a student's piece. This invitation will be extended to all parents, so that it should not seem unusual to see 1-3 parents per day participating in the RWW. They are also encouraged to bring their own writing, if they have any available.

Again, in terms of special needs students, parent volunteers could be assigned any number of students to work with in a given class period, so that it should not seem unusual for an adult other than the teacher to work with students. When assessing those students who might need help with a particular writing issue, especially those students who may be classified as learning disabled, I could assign a parent volunteer to work with that student for a brief period of time before moving on to another student. It is important to note that volunteers will not be working strictly with special needs students; rather, they will be working with whatever students need assistance, which again de-emphasizes the "special need" and effectively portrays special needs students as if they were any other student in terms of their emotional and social treatment.

Additionally, in the letter home, I would ask parents if there is any particular issue that their child might have or if there are any special needs they would specifically like me to address. While I would have the benefit of an IEP, it could only help to let parents know that I am actively soliciting their suggestions or concerns. And I would attempt to keep their concerns in mind when helping their child. This is important because the IEP might not specify all the strategies that could be beneficial because they might be impractical for a school district to guarantee or implement. I, on the other hand, might be in a better position to offer those strategies informally while in the RWW. For instance, an IEP could probably not contain the provision that the student have a peer tutor because of the difficulties in actually providing one. I could in most cases informally guarantee

such a condition outside the legal confines of the IEP and not feel legally restricted if I failed to provide one.

Collaboration

As the RWW is an open environment where students have both freedom and responsibility, institutionalized assistance from special education teachers and other professionals could look much like parent participation when such assistance takes place in the classroom. The difference would be that these adults would be working solely with special needs students. However, since this will more than likely involve more than one student, the assistance that they provide would look much like the assistance that any students might be receiving in that they would simply be providing it to those students who need it most.

For example, a special education teacher might float from student to student, targeting individual concerns, or s/he might group several such students together if they have a common problem that would be better addressed in a small group. In this manner, special needs students will not be treated any differently from any other student in the class because all students will be receiving help at least periodically.

Again, the first key issue is to explain to these professionals exactly what the RWW consists of. Once they are thoroughly familiar with the kinds of assignments and procedures that take place, they will be better able to assist students with assignments.

Outside of the RWW (assuming that special education teachers have special needs students one period per day, as they do at the school I currently work at), special education teachers will simply provide further aid for the writing issues students worked

on in class. This will be the more appropriate time to proofread, edit, and polish material as much as possible. With this extra time, special needs students will come closer to, if not equaling, the kind of draft quality that other students are capable of in their writing. This would also be a good place to get a piece of writing started, since this often seems to be one of the more difficult areas in writing. A special education teacher might be more readily able to provide suggestions or directions that a student could take with a piece.

Authentic multi-level instruction

A RWW provides a framework from which students and teachers engage in authentic reading and writing activities within a range of available options. One of the key components, absent in many other traditional language arts classes, is extensive student choice and responsibility. Within the established guidelines, students have significant freedom to read and write based on their own individual interests. The theory behind this kind of setup is that students will be more motivated because they will be able to make exactly those choices that they have been previously denied. Thus, if a student finds that a book is boring, he can choose an alternative. If a student discovers that a piece of writing simply won't work out, she can choose to scrap it and begin another.

Students in a RWW will have an expected number of final, polished writing assignments to complete over a given card marking. This should gravitate around one final draft per week, giving students a total of around 10 per card marking. These final drafts, kept in writing portfolios, will be a significant portion of their grades. However, since grading writing is both time-consuming and subjective, students will choose which drafts they will actually be evaluated on, while the rest will simply be credit or no credit.

This allows students to evaluate their own writing and decide which pieces are superior. Students are thus engaging in reflection about their own learning in the class. They will be actively encouraged to solicit the opinions of others—students and adults—to help them make those judgments. Once chosen, students will submit the required amount (three or four seems to be a workable number) with an explanation of why these pieces were chosen for grading.

Obviously, students will vary widely in their writing abilities and the growth they demonstrate over a given period. Since a purely objective grading criteria for any piece of writing is pure myth (although some English teachers will disagree), any evaluation will take growth and effort into consideration. This is where the portfolio comes in handy. After polished pieces are submitted for evaluation, I will be able to access a student's portfolio and compare these with pieces that were not chosen. I will also be able to see growth by noting when certain pieces were written and examining them to see if certain writing issues (grammar, punctuation, etc.) have been eliminated.

The obvious benefit to special needs students is that they will not be evaluated against some imaginary "perfect paper," but rather against what they have already done. In essence, they are competing against themselves. And this kind of evaluation applies to all the other students in the class as well.

Another facet of a student's grade will be more casual written assignments designed to enhance students reading and writing in general without the sometimes frustrating requirement that a piece be polished. One of these will be a weekly vocabulary assignment, where students will be required to choose five words they are unfamiliar with and use them in a way that demonstrates that, after looking them up, they now have a

passing familiarity with them. Since spelling is also generally an issue, students will also be engaged in choosing their own spelling words and giving each other tests on those words once per week. Words should be submitted for approval to the teacher, and should be words that they might be likely to use (although this is not a hard requirement).

Another important part of their grade will be writing journals. These are not journals in the traditional sense, but a place for them to record notes taken on whole-class mini-lessons. From one to five times per week, I will dispense writing information in the form of five to ten minute mini-lessons. These will be designed to target writing issues that nearly all students have, such as proper use of quotations. Students will be required to jot down a few notes so that they may refer to these journals when they run across such a situation in their own writing. Taking notes will also help cement the information in their heads. At the end of the marking period, students will turn these in for a credit / no credit grade, earning full points so long as they have all the required notes.

Participation and publishing (sharing writing) is another important part of the RWW. Students will also be graded based on their level of effort and participation in the RWW. Basically, all students will start out with an 'A', but will have it lowered based on how frequently they are observed wasting time. It is obviously difficult to decide if a student is wasting time or is really "thinking," as they often exclaim, so this is really more of a tool to ensure that students continue working as much as possible and are discouraged from using the time to "hang out" with their friends. Publishing their work is part of this participation grade. Students will be periodically asked to take the "author's chair" to read something they have written. All students will be encouraged to do this

several times during the semester, though no student should be forced. This is a forum for students to make public what they have created.

One problem that arises in an environment such as this is the vastly different amounts of time students need to finish assignments. Some students may have trouble completing one polished product per week, while others will be able to complete three or more. So that students have something constructive to work on should they finish all their requirements for a given week, another part of the RWW that I would like to institute is centers. Seen in many elementary classrooms, centers are places in the class that students can go to to complete self-directed academic tasks. These would be placed strategically around the room, and all students would be responsible for completing a certain number of centers per week. Beyond this requirement, any centers completed would count as extra credit. Thus, those students who are classic overachievers should not be bored and unoccupied because they have alternate assignments to complete.

While the writing aspect of the RWW takes up most of the actual classroom time, students will also be required to read. As with writing, they have significant choice of what they wish to read. I hope to have a fully stocked library of young adult novels and non-fiction books from which to choose, but I will also allow them to check books out from the library or bring them from home. The basic requirement is that students read one book every three weeks or so and complete some type of assignment to show they have read and understood it. This assignment would probably be to write a review of the book, possibly with one of the online booksellers such as Amazon.com. Students may read basically any book they want so long as it is approved. Books that may not be approved are ones that may contain little to no "literary merit," whatever that means. For instance, I

may not approve the recent book written by the wrester known as "The Rock." I would try to steer students to either informational texts or young adult novels.

Since a major part of the RWW is individual choice, students will be more likely to choose assignments that are representative of their own ability levels, intelligences, and also learning styles because what they do in a given class period is up to them within a range of options. For instance, a student may choose to work on a piece of writing, read a book or story, conference with an adult or another student, brainstorm ideas, research information, etc. While the potential for chaos might be slightly higher, the advantage of student interest and motivation should more than outweigh the possible detriments. In effect, students are designing their own course of study, with the teacher functioning more as a mentor than a dispenser of information.

Accommodations and adaptations

The biggest accommodation for academic challenges in the RWW is student choice. Students would be responsible for completing certain genres of writing, such as two stories, two book reviews, etc. They are able to choose subject matter of these writings and scheduling—when they want to work on them.

Additional accommodations include extensive peer mentoring and conferencing, grading based on effort and ability level, and individual conferencing with the teacher about problems that arise in their writing.

Community in the classroom

In the beginning of the year, it is crucial to establish rules for running the RWW smoothly and also so that students understand how they should treat one another. While rules are important to lay the groundwork, the concepts behind these rules need to be made more concrete in students' minds. One method that I think will prove effective is to role play certain scenarios where students could come into conflict with each other. Students should demonstrate the "right" and the "wrong" way to deal with these conflicts, and the teacher should stop the role play at appropriate moments and have other students comment on the situation and what the actors should do. And these scenarios should be role played at appropriate times during the school year, not just the first few days of class, so that students can be constantly reinforced about what it means to be a polite, considerate citizen.

It is also important to show students that every person in the classroom is a unique, complicated individual with their own interests, dreams, and desires. One way to help demonstrate this is the aforementioned "author's chair," where students get up in front of the class and read their own personal writing. Since writing is essentially a snapshot of a person's personality on paper, this is a good way to help share thoughts, feelings, etc. Another positive way to do this has been done by elementary school teachers for eons, but sadly left behind in the face of the supposedly more rigorous academic standards of secondary school—show and tell. Set aside one day every week or so where students can bring something in and show it off to the class. This event does not have to be called "show and tell," and maybe it would be better off named something else if students perceived it as "too kiddie." The core behind the practice is solid, however;

allow students to share something of themselves in an effort to build a community where every student feels important and valuable.

Dealing with behavioral challenges

With behavioral challenges, it is important to set the standard for proper behavior as soon as possible through rules and modeling, and it is equally important to be as consistent as possible so that students are fully aware of the consequences of misbehaving. These guidelines—rules of the classroom and consequences for not following them—should be posted in the classroom so that they are easily referred to.

In the first instance of misbehavior, students should be given a firm warning so that they know the behavior was observed. This is often enough on its own to discourage further misbehavior. If the behavior continues, students should be given some form of censure. One method that I have found particularly effective in middle school is to give that student a five minute timeout in the hall. I believe that there are two reasons why this is effective. First, it removes the student from the probable source of the disruption—other students. Second, middle school students perceive it as a "kiddie" punishment and are embarrassed by it. Before they return to the class, the teacher should also have a brief conference to find out what the problem is and to attempt a mutually beneficial solution. It should be emphasized, however, that the behavior is unacceptable. This is usually enough to discourage any further misbehavior.

If these tactics don't work, then I think students need to be introduced to the administration. This does not mean they should receive a formal punishment, however. The first person they should probably be sent to is the counselor so that they can try work

out the difficulties they are having. Administrative contact should be accompanied by a call to the parents describing exactly what the behavior was and the steps taken to correct it. If the problem becomes chronic, students should then be sent to the principal or assistant principal for official censure, and this should also be accompanied by a call home to the parents. Teachers should use their best judgment when deciding whether a problem merits counseling or official reprimand.

With certain misbehavior problems, students should be made aware that they will skip lower level consequences. For hitting someone, for instance, they would be sent instantly to the principal for official censure.

Obviously, these rules are meant as guidelines. Certain students might require more stretching of the rules than others. For instance, a student with ADHD might receive more leeway if s/he just outside the acceptable behavior norms since that may be the best behavior a student can engage in at a given moment. Students who are emotionally impaired might likewise need to have the rules stretched for them slightly, and perhaps a more extensive conference with the teacher or another adult might more profitably solve the situation than official censure.

As a proactive measure to prevent misbehavior before it appears, a teacher should reward positive behavior to emphasize what it is and what it looks like. This could be anything from thanking a student for raising his hand to giving a small prize to a student for picking garbage up off the floor without being asked.

Physical design of the classroom

(See attached diagram.)

The basic idea behind this type of physical arrangement is that students should be able to have significant freedom to move around the room and float from table to table. This is especially important in a RWW where students will need to conference with others and go to different centers to complete assignments. This type of freedom will help me more adequately access the learning styles of those students who have difficulty sitting in a desk in rigid rows. It allows for better ease of communication.

Accommodations for students with physical and sensory challenges

These accommodations would depend strongly on what type of sensory and physical disabilities were present in my room, and also on the resources that would be available to me.

One resource that I would attempt to use, as stated previously, is parent volunteers or peer mentors. Assigning a parent or student to work one-on-one with such a student could greatly assist him/her in whatever task they are performing. For instance, a blind child could dictate notes to their partner, or orally explicate a piece of writing while a parent or student with strong typing skills could type it out on the computer. A volunteer or peer could also help with the physical manipulation of items and objects in the case of a student who had such difficulty, such as severe cerebral palsy.

I would attempt to find as many computer-assisted software and hardware as possible, also, so that these students are able to use the technology. For a blind student,

this could include programs that translate speech into words on a word processing program. For a student who had a significant speech impediment, perhaps I could obtain a computerized speaking device such as Stephen Hawking uses.

In the case of a deaf student, along with the technology that usually accompanies such a student, I would learn the rudiments of sign language and teach several lessons to the rest of the students so that we could all better communicate with that student. If s/he was willing, I might also ask for his/her assistance to demonstrate.

Again, I think that these kinds of accommodations are extremely situation specific. The most concrete recommendation I can make about what I will do without actually knowing what kinds of physically disabled students I will teach is that I will remain as open minded as possible and perform as much research as necessary which will help me include them in the classroom.