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# Including Students with Special Needs in a Writing Workshop

*A teacher adapts Writing Workshop for children in her class who have learning and behavioral challenges and addresses larger issues of belonging in a community of learners.*

Special education evolved as a means of resolving the problems of resource distribution in classrooms by simultaneously “allowing mainstream teachers to work with homogeneous groups of students and provide individualized attention to students who were the most different” (Manset & Semmel, 1997, p. 163). However, homogeneous grouping practices have been challenged because they often separate students from mainstream education, limiting their interaction with their mainstream peers and often resulting in inferior instruction for students with learning disabilities (Jenkins, Jewell, Leicester, O’Connor, Jenkins, & Troutner, 1994). Thus, inclusive education models seek to help render more equality in educational experiences for students in special education.

Since the passage of Public Law 94-142, known as Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the number of inclusion models of education has increased significantly, and inclusive education has developed multiple meanings (Corbett, 2001). As schools design systems to educate students with disabilities in regular education classrooms, a continuum of services has been implemented, but the goal of inclusion has remained focused on providing students with disabilities with the “least restrictive environment” (McLeskey, Hoppey, Williamson, & Rentz, 2004) while at the same time benefiting all students involved in the grouping design. In this article, we present a case study, selected from our research, that focuses on the growth of a group of students who qualified for special education services and who participated in writers workshop within a regular fourth-grade classroom. The study was conducted in a school in a southeast state of the United States. The school, with about 300 K–5 students, the majority of which were students of color (85% African American) and of low

socioeconomic status (93.4% on reduced or free lunch), had a long history of “low performance” and struggled to achieve passing test scores. The school administrators decided to adopt an inclusion model at the 4th and 5th grades because newly legislated state policy mandated that all students, including students enrolled in special education programs, were required to participate in state standardized tests, and their test scores would be equally counted in school evaluation criteria. By exposing the students with learning disabilities to the same curriculum and preparation as their regular education peers, administrators hoped they might show greater academic progress than they had in their previously self-contained classes.

Manset and Semmel (1997) researched the effectiveness of eight models of inclusive teaching and found that the “programs incorporated highly structured teaching practices that included individualized basic skills instruction and frequent testing” (p. 176). These programs had limited success, especially in that students in special education programs were not “returned to traditional mainstream classes”—a significant goal of inclusive education. Manset and Semmel speculate that:

*Multiple means of examining student progress as well as assessing classroom ecologies for opportunities to learn, interact, and communicate may be a more valid approach to the question of the effectiveness of inclusive programming. It could lead to models that transform the mainstream so that it includes truly accessible content-area curriculum, social skills instruction, and a language-rich environment for students with language learning difficulties. (p. 176)*

According to Nielson (1997), “creating a positive and comfortable environment is paramount

for the success of both regular and special education students' success in an inclusive model" (p. 7). This can be accomplished "by using cooperative learning to facilitate small-group interaction" (p. 9). Furthermore, Nielsen contends that students who work together in small groups create an accommodating environment, offering more praise, encouragement, and support than in other work environments. When students work together, the group's goal is for everyone to succeed, and this allows "for social and emotional growth for everyone involved" (p. 9).

However, discussions of inclusion must go beyond concerns for social and emotional growth. In this time of accountability when students in special education programs are held to the same standard of achievement in academic development as regular education students, we must include discussions of effective pedagogy without leaning towards the skill-based programs that Manset and Semmel found somewhat ineffective.

Nine fourth-grade students identified as emotionally handicapped (EH) or having specific learning disabilities (SLD) were the focus of this study. Until the year of this study, these nine students had been served in a resource room separate from general education classrooms. Now they were to be placed in classrooms with their regular education peers. As Corbett (2001) points out, inclusive education needs to be concerned with "creating and sustaining systems and structures which develop and support flexible and adaptable approaches to learning" (p. 2). Students grouped together with emotional, behavioral, and learning disabilities will have individual, specific needs, and no single, rigid method of teaching could possibly meet them all. This study aimed to understand how a group of students formerly taught in special education classrooms perform, in terms of literacy development, in a peer-supportive learning community where they are given freedom and flexibility as well as individual guidance.

Nancy, coauthor of this article, was the teacher of the fourth-grade class in which this study was situated. In this school, all the fourth-grade teachers were monitored and required to prepare their students for the state writing test that took place in the early spring. Lesson plans adhering to the school writing curriculum were submitted regularly, and students were required to write to

prompts and in specific genres according to the test requirements. In the previous two years, Nancy's students had done well on the test. Due to her reputation as a good teacher, she was asked to include nine students from the special education program in her room. For this challenge, she believed a writing workshop approach would cater to students' individual needs through its more flexible and interactive teaching model.

The study was initiated as a teacher-research project (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993): a classroom teacher's inquiry about her students and her own practice in an inclusive classroom. Later, she was joined by Danling, a university researcher, in conducting class observation, interviews, and data analysis. For four and a half months, Danling visited the classroom regularly during writing workshop. Nancy collected all the students' work and tracked writing skills development, learning behavior, and social behavior, all of which were recorded in the assessment folder for each student. Danling and Nancy met weekly to discuss the students' progress. This article will not only illustrate how the students with special needs

grew as writers in an inclusive writing community, but also how a fourth-grade teacher systematically structured the learning environment and tailored her instruction to guide her students to improve their language skills and develop as writers.

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## **PREPARING ALL STUDENTS FOR A WRITING WORKSHOP WITH AN INCLUSION MODEL**

All of the other teachers in the school except for Nancy approached language arts instruction from a skill-based perspective using direct instruction for grammar and language skills. In previous years, students who received special education services were taught to write in a linear, step-by-step process: brainstorm on a specific planning worksheet in response to a prompt provided by the teacher, transfer the planned writing to a narrative or essay frame, edit and make "corrections," submit the work to the teacher, and recopy the teacher's corrections as the "final copy." This year, Nancy had to spend the first few weeks preparing her students for a writing workshop classroom. They were expected to write every day,

generate their own topics, choose the genre appropriate for their messages, confer with their peers and the teacher, and share their work in public. All these ideas were very unfamiliar to her students.

In previous years, Nancy was dissatisfied with how students with special needs were positioned in her classroom. Although she strived for a “classroom community,” most of her students were not truly included, and she was aware of a division between groups of students that often left the students with special needs academically behind and socially isolated. So this year, Nancy decided to make a number of changes in her teaching. She was excited and anxious to fully implement the workshop with an inclusion model. Still, teaching 29 students, of whom 9 were identified as learners with special needs, without any special education services, was an awfully daunting task.

Writing instruction, 50 minutes daily, started with either a minilesson or a read-aloud that was delivered to the whole group. Immediately following the minilesson, the students began independent writing. It was at this time that they were welcome to change seating and join friends or to sit alone. It was also during independent writing that Nancy conferred with small groups or individuals to read and revise their writing. A record was kept to ensure every student participated in a formal one-on-one conference with the teacher on a regular basis; thus, the students knew that they were not singled out for “remediation,” the most usual reason to meet with the teacher in their past educational experiences. This interactive process enabled Nancy to meet the varying needs of her students. At the end of writing class, two or three students shared their work.

Since all the students were learning about the workshop model, minilessons were first drawn from the need to teach workshop procedures. The students had lessons on all parts of the workshop, including but not limited to: teacher and peer conferences, peer responses to writing, classroom policy regarding student-selected seating, expectations of work production, and writing-share in an author’s chair. This instruction helped all the students transition to an inclusive model, for peer support is a critical part of writing workshop.

Later minilessons addressed skills that all or most of the class needed to work on, based on

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observation. Since most of the students had well-developed oral language expression but minimal writing skills, initial instruction focused on simply freeing the students to write. Their oral language expression was used to help them develop their written language; discussions and conversations were the foundation for writing.

Nancy evaluated students based on their current performance; decisions were made and goals were set for and by the students to improve their writing. For some students, this meant initially focusing on something as basic as word order so that their writing articulated a message. For others, it meant developing their continuous expression beyond one or two sentences. And for some, it meant working on their focus so that their writing related to one topic rather than touching at random on a list of unrelated thoughts. A few of the more proficient students had a good understanding of “story” and “essay” and only needed to learn how to elaborate and craft a voice of their own.

The philosophy of the writing workshop model helped all students’ learning regardless of their various abilities. Here, students work together and exchange ideas, supporting each other in their work and treating each other as valued members of a learning community. One student, whose writing progress is described below, illustrates how she grew as a writer in a supportive learning community.

## A STUDENT’S GROWTH AS A WRITER IN THE COMMUNITY

At the beginning of the school year, all nine of Nancy’s students identified with special needs were writing below fourth-grade level. Michelle (pseudonym) struggled the most. She had spent time in two schools and began receiving special education services in second grade. She was reading at a late second-grade level, as assessed by the districtwide curriculum-based tests, and participated in few academic tasks in any content area. Her file described her not only as a student with Specific Learning Disabilities and “academically behind,” but also “socially ill-adjusted” with a history of fighting with other students and disrupting class.

Michelle’s early writing attempts were incomplete and very laborious, more so than any other

student in the class. She appeared to get frustrated easily, announcing she had nothing to write about, often saying, “I ain’t doin’ this.” Each day during the first two weeks of school, Nancy met with students who struggled, selecting topics for small-group instruction. During the conferences, the students shared their life stories and many found topics for their writing. These small-group conferences were helpful to most students, but not Michelle. She would talk, but not write. She continued to have a hard time writing.

During the first week of writing workshop, Michelle chose to sit with Lena, also a student with special needs, who was quiet and had fewer problems in writing. During that week, despite working with the teacher and other students, Michelle produced less than a sentence during each 25-minute writing time, while her friend Lena wrote paragraphs each day. The following examples constitute her three days’ work, which showed her frustration in writing, as each day’s production seemed to become shorter and less complete:

*When I First to school I was so happy to  
school when I came to sco  
One day I going To my Grandma house  
One day I was doing a*

Nancy conferred with Michelle several times about how to break her writer’s block. As a result, Michelle started to draw, not pictures, but her name, in letters of different sizes and shapes, written vertically and horizontally. During the second week in September, another student, Alyson, began to join Lena and Michelle at their writing table. Alyson, a high-achieving, quiet student who loved to write, often encouraged Michelle to “just write the way you talk. Don’t worry about anything.”

Gradually Michelle became more socialized and began to participate; it was obvious that Alyson played a large role in the process. Michelle began enjoying the interaction she had with Alyson and Lena during writing, both giving and getting feedback, reading and listening to stories, and sharing knowledge and information. In order to keep her partners, Michelle had learned to control her aggressive behavior, offering a more calm and friendly demeanor.

Michelle still struggled with her writing, which couldn’t go beyond one or two sentences. For days she would scribble all over her papers and then ball them up and throw them in the garbage rather than file them in her folder as expected. Observing Michelle from a distance, Nancy decided to leave her alone for a while, thinking: This is the first time Michelle has been asked to use written language to express herself rather than practice skills according to strict guidelines; therefore, she might need time to play with words, to work through her frustrations, and to find a comfortable place in the classroom as well as a comfort level in writing along with her peers.

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and give them more time to adjust, yet she kept them on her mind when she designed her minilessons. Students like Michelle, who needed to develop a sense of story

and learn how to unfold that story with related events, needed time and individual support. The following is an excerpt of a conference Nancy had with Michelle in mid-September while she worked at the table with Lena and Alyson:

**N:** *Did you enjoy the story today, Michelle?*  
[Sweet, Sweet Memory (Woodson)]

**M:** *Yea.*

**N:** *I thought so. When I was reading, I saw you smile.*

**M:** *I don’t have a grandpa but my grandma an’ I go to church a lot.*

**N:** *What other things do you do with your grandma?*

**M:** *Go to the mall. With my auntie. My auntie buys me stuff. Clothes.*

**N:** *Can you write about that today? I noticed yesterday you started a great story about someone visiting, and you both were going to your grandma’s house. Maybe you could work on that more today.*

**L:** *I’m writing about my sister. What you writing Alyson?*

**N:** *Okay, girls. I’m going to check to see if Tisha needs help now.*



When Lena joined in the conference, Nancy intentionally exited so that the students would continue to talk about their writing together, thus supporting Michelle. After this conference, Michelle did return to the story she had started and was able to add a few more sentences to her original work.

Nancy often used literature as the springboard for writing (Harwayne, 1992); it helped students to choose topics, to organize a story, to understand voice, and to try new ways to express themselves. Children's literature allowed Nancy's students to connect the stories read with their lives, thus serving as fodder for their own stories. To open the school year, she read books with strong, positive African American characters such as *The Bat Boy and His Violin* (Curtis, 1998) and *Sunflower Island* (Green, 1999). For more involved book talks, Nancy often added more time for book-share to the writing class. Literature was shared daily and at more than one time during the day; all books were selected with a conscious effort to contribute something to the students' learning, either academically or socially.

Students were encouraged to talk about literature in many ways, but mostly in authentic conversations (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). From these discussions, the students found their own stories, and eventually were able to express themselves more fluently and with more substance. To raise awareness of the students' own behavior, Nancy selected children's literature with themes that would open discussion of appropriate and inappropriate behavior, as well as the consequences of such behavior. Throughout the year, read-aloud novels such as *Holes* (Sachar, 1998), *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* (Gantos, 2000) and picture books like *Crow Boy* (Yashima, 1955), *Wings* (Myers, 2000) and *The Big Box* (Morrison, 1999) were used to generate discussion about behavior, inclusion, and exclusion of people. These discussions helped the students realize the injustice and prejudice in their own behavior and perceptions, and that an individual's behavior is often a consequence of the social order of the group.

One of the techniques Nancy used to help her students understand story development and pay special attention to story details was to require students to illustrate stories she read aloud. After read-

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ing and discussing a story, she would read the story again to the class, stop at certain points, and let the students draw a picture of what they heard. This procedure continued repeatedly to the end of the story. Then she would ask her students to write one or two sentences about each picture, linking their drawings to retelling the story they had heard. In October, almost two months after the class had started the writing workshop, Nancy was aware that many students were still struggling to develop their stories into full length. She decided to use this strategy to help her students develop their sense of story plot. Each day for a week, the story *Mandy* (Booth, 1991) was used for this series of lessons as part of writing workshop. *Mandy* is the story of a

little girl and her grandmother. Mandy, who is deaf, is able to help her grandmother find her treasured pin that was lost on their walk. When asked to describe her pictures, Michelle wrote four complete sentences about the story she had heard—the longest piece she had ever completed since entering fourth

grade. Michelle captured the sharing between Mandy and her grandmother, baking cookies together, dancing to the radio, sharing the photo album, and taking a walk. Michelle was excited, and her friends, Lena and Alyson, shared her joy. Her classmates also showed their pride in her when she shared her work.

From that point of breakthrough, Michelle began to write with more ease and completed her first story (see Figures 1.1–1.3):

*Once upon a time there live Babrie and Michelle.*

*we live in a house a big pool and a big garden Poosey wellow [pussy willow] we like to pick them up put them in our Flower pot.*

*First we went to the mall to get our nails Done we all ready got our Clothes.*

*We went to our car from a car. the car cost \$9,000.*

*We went to the Book Store to get some Books to read for Bedtime and have fun.*

*we went to the shoe store we bot some High heels they look good.*

*Back home to get in the pool we hade fun we played all day.*

*The End*

It seemed that Michelle's first writing modeled the illustration techniques Nancy had used, with each part as a separate picture starting with the characters and setting, describing the activities the characters did during one day, and winding the story back to the home setting, with a summary of how that day felt to her. This story not only presented much information about Michelle's home life and her interests, but also her knowledge of story concept and writing skills. It was interesting to see that Michelle started her story as a fictional piece and then switched to a personal narrative, which seems to suggest she experimented in her writing with two genres, one she learned from reading or from her peers, and the other based on her oral expression.

In two months, Michelle had progressed from "I have nothing to write" and "I can't write," to drawing her name and letters, to writing this complete piece. This was quite an accomplishment and a big jump in her growth as a writer. But most of all, this story marked a turning point in Michelle's writing development: she knew she could write, she began to have a desire for writing, and she wanted her peers to enjoy her stories.

After completion of her first story, she rarely complained about writing. Every day she wrote and shared with her peers. Some days she wrote more, and some days she wrote less. Some days, when something exciting happened at home, she couldn't wait to write about it and share it with her friends. After finishing her story, Michelle would not only share within her own group, but would travel to other groups to share. Reading her writing to others made her work more cohesive and interesting, as her peers would press her for clarification, details, and exciting twists. Writing for an intimate audience served as an incentive for Michelle and stirred a desire in her to write better. Just as important, writing connected her with the community; her peers saw her as one of them and, gradually, they wanted to include her in their collaborative work.

As Halloween approached, the students developed a taste for scary stories. It seemed they wanted to prolong Halloween through their writ-

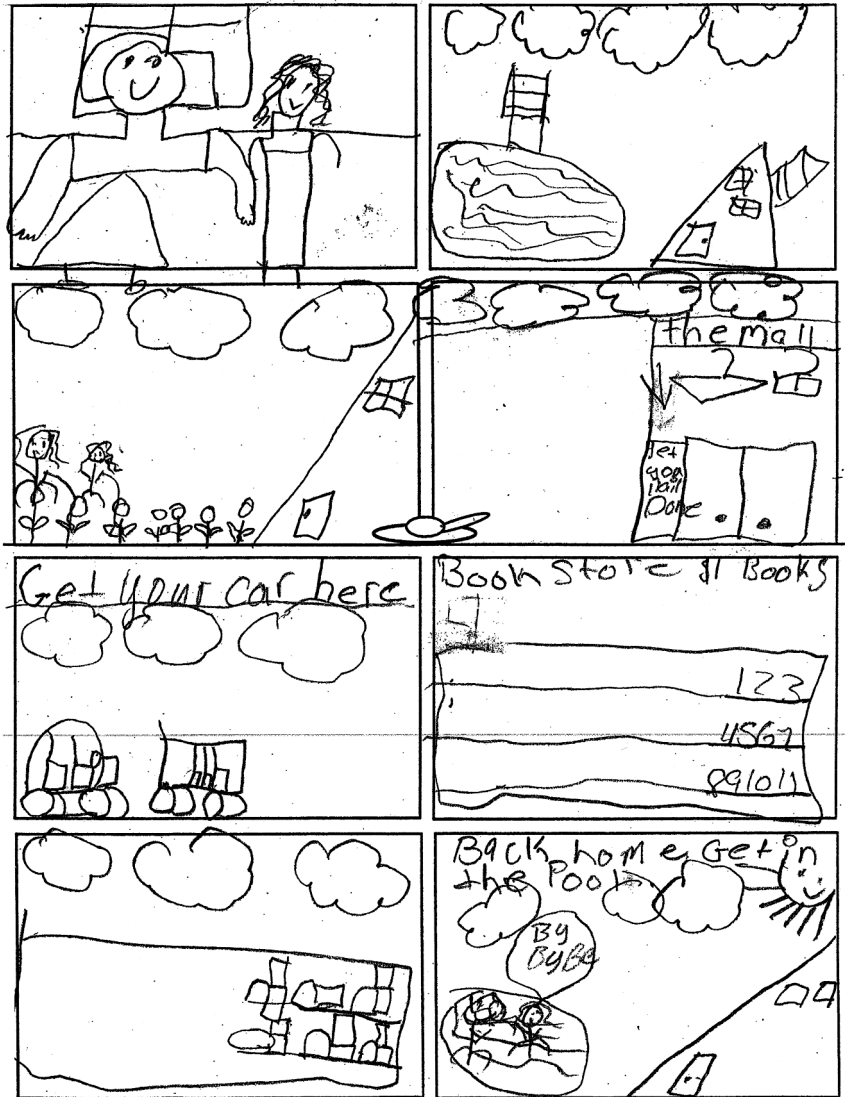


Figure 1.1. Michelle's first story illustrations

ing. To support their interest and facilitate their work, Nancy read aloud various kinds of scary stories such as *The Monster's Ring* (Coville), *The Ghost in Room 11* (Wright), *Dead Man in Indian Creek* (Hahn) and Edgar Allan Poe's "Telltale Heart" (frequently anthologized; see, for example, Poe, 1984). During minilessons on writing, Nancy directed the students back to the literature to have another look at the techniques the writers used to create scary scenes and action: what words and images the writers used to illustrate the chilling scenes, how they set the mood and tone, and how the writers developed suspense. Reading and studying the authors' craft fired up the students' desire to write their own stories. All across the classroom, students were writing pieces

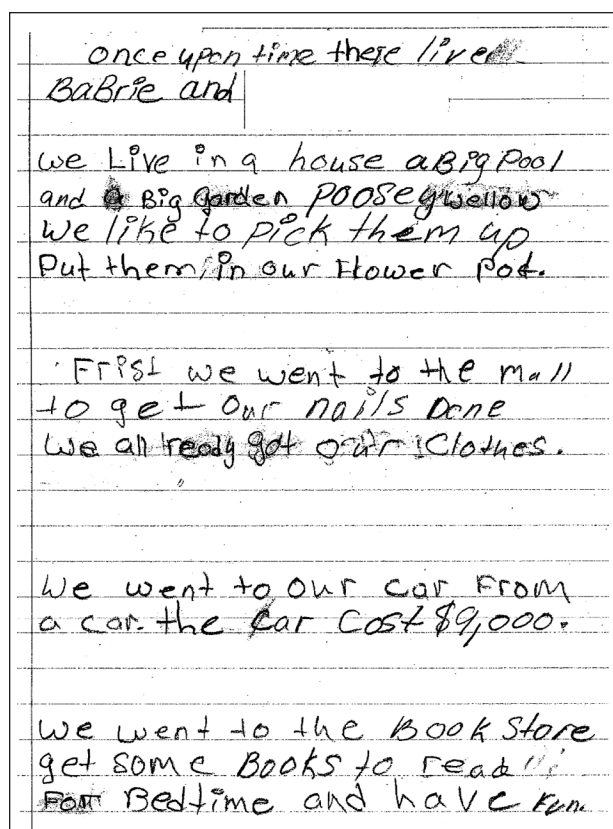


Figure 1.2. Michelle's first story page one

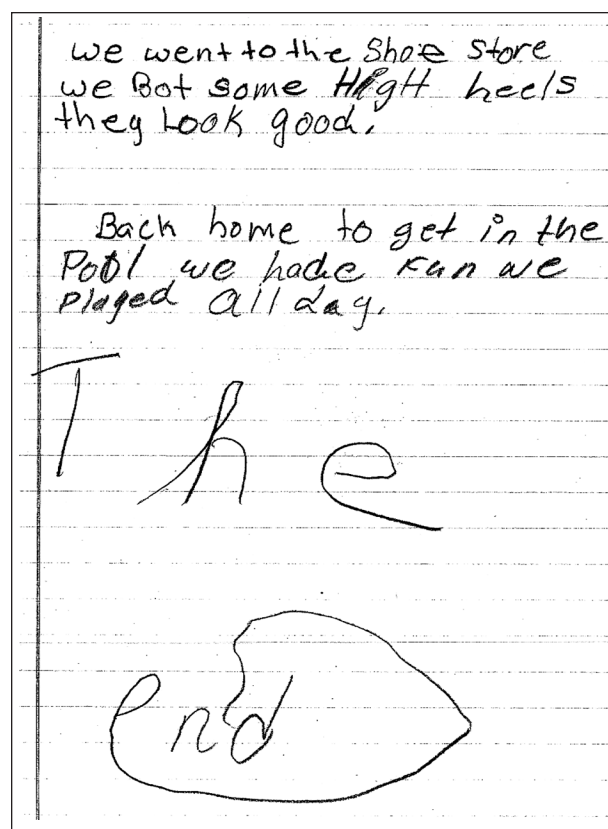


Figure 1.3. Michelle's first story page two

to scare each other, and several students wrote collaboratively.

A competition developed between the boys and girls to see who could write the scariest story. Alyson and Lena were not interested in participating, so Michelle reached out, leaving her table to sit with a new group of girls to work on the story. Their first attempt failed, but Michelle didn't quit and decided to try again herself. She reworked the beginning of the story, experimenting with dialogue:

*One day I was down the Hallway. I saw a girl had with a mask on in school. Said the what is you looking at me for saying it in a scary voice. I said you is going to have a Halloween party. She said no in a scary voice. I'm coming here to hip-pyitize [hypnotize] people. Just to scare people.*

The scary stories were the first fiction Michelle wrote, and this was also the first time she chose to revise her work. She struggled with the revision, constantly erasing and replacing words and sentences, which seemed to indicate that Michelle was

unable to meet her own expectations. Her peers recognized both her frustration and her effort. The girls who collaborated with her before came to Michelle's rescue and helped her finish her work. Though Michelle's wasn't one of the stories that the class honored as "most scary," she had collaborated to complete her first fictional story and truly felt a part of the writing community.

From August to November, Michelle developed her confidence, stamina, and skills as a writer. She completed several stories and tried two different genres of writing. She began to understand the importance of revision and was willing to ask for and accept help from her peers and her teacher. Rather than being diagnosed as "socially ill-adjusted," Michelle was becoming part of the learning community where she produced work, shared her stories, and worked well with her peers. Her mother reported Michelle's excitement in making more friends and in her academic progress, and told Nancy how happy Michelle was in this class community—more so than ever before in her entire school history.



After Michelle perceived herself as a writer, she wanted to improve her writing. Sentence fluency and conventional skills still needed to be developed. During the first few months, Nancy ignored the surface structure of Michelle's texts, focusing on helping her become a writer. Noting Michelle's progress, Nancy decided it was time to give more attention to skills. By this time, though, Michelle was ready and had the desire to do so. At each conference with Nancy, Michelle first read her "work in progress." While reading, she recognized some errors in the sentences. She would add words to make sentences smoother, use punctuation to clarify her meaning, and change tenses to make the writing consistent. From minilessons, which were also reinforced by peer conferences, she learned to use the caret-editing notation for adding new words, how and when to capitalize words, and she started understanding the function of a paragraph. Gradually, her writing became smoother, cleaner, and more comprehensible.

In addition to working on mechanical skills, Michelle also wanted to try the techniques taught in minilessons that were popular with her peers. For example, seeing everyone learn to include dialogue in their writing, Michelle wanted to do the same. In December, she came to her conference with a piece she was working on and asked Nancy for specific help with using dialogue. She wanted her piece to "sound right." During the conference, Michelle read and reread, erasing extra words, adding new, and using her voice to help Nancy know what her characters were saying. Nancy, listening, could tell when speakers' turns changed and suggested Michelle use quotation marks and key narration words as much as she was able in this first attempt. After much struggling, Michelle produced the following piece (also see Figure 2):

*"sister, I know today is your Birthday to day but I don't like this. when it be someone else's birthday I want mine to. well when I was going to the car sister is going to in the front seat. I yelled, Mom, Aaliyah in the front seat. "Mom" said she is the Birthday girl. Oh man well we was at my grandmother house and then my antie came she gave my sister a pretty dress and then we had gave her some money. and my sister friend her some candy gave her Braslessy [bracelets] to*

*were and the[n] it was time for my antie was fint [fixing] to go she gave all of us money \$1 and she got in the car and she to[ld] us that im going to take us the fiar and we said okay.*

Michelle was proud of the story, which had a voice she liked and included the new writing technique popular among her peers. She completed the piece by drawing an illustration, with labels, of her grandmother's house and both her sister and her aunt, one of the few times she added drawings to her stories.

Nancy felt a great satisfaction in Michelle's overall improvement as a writer from August to December. Like Michelle, the other eight students with special needs also made progress to varying degrees, which gave Nancy great confidence in the inclusion model. It reinforced her belief that a writing workshop approach, which systematically addresses individual students' needs, is effective in several ways: it includes into the regular classroom students who qualify for special education services; it advances their social development; and it helps them develop their language skills and grow as writers. The writing workshop

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allowed the students to work at their own pace and choose topics based on personal interests. The inclusion model not only gives students opportunities to learn along with and

from regular education peers, but also provides the latter opportunities to learn and work with students whose learning styles and abilities differ from their own. With the writing workshop model, the teacher helps students to develop their writing concepts and skills by providing time, direct instruction, and one-on-one coaching; with only rare exceptions, *all* students improve from one piece of writing to another. Best of all, in this "least restrictive learning environment" that benefits all students (McLesky, et al., 2004), individual students share and encourage each other as writers while they help and support one another to grow together, each in their respective ways.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT THE TEACHER DID TO MAKE THIS INCLUSION MODEL WORK

Just like Michelle, whose progress we detailed in this article, the other eight students identified as



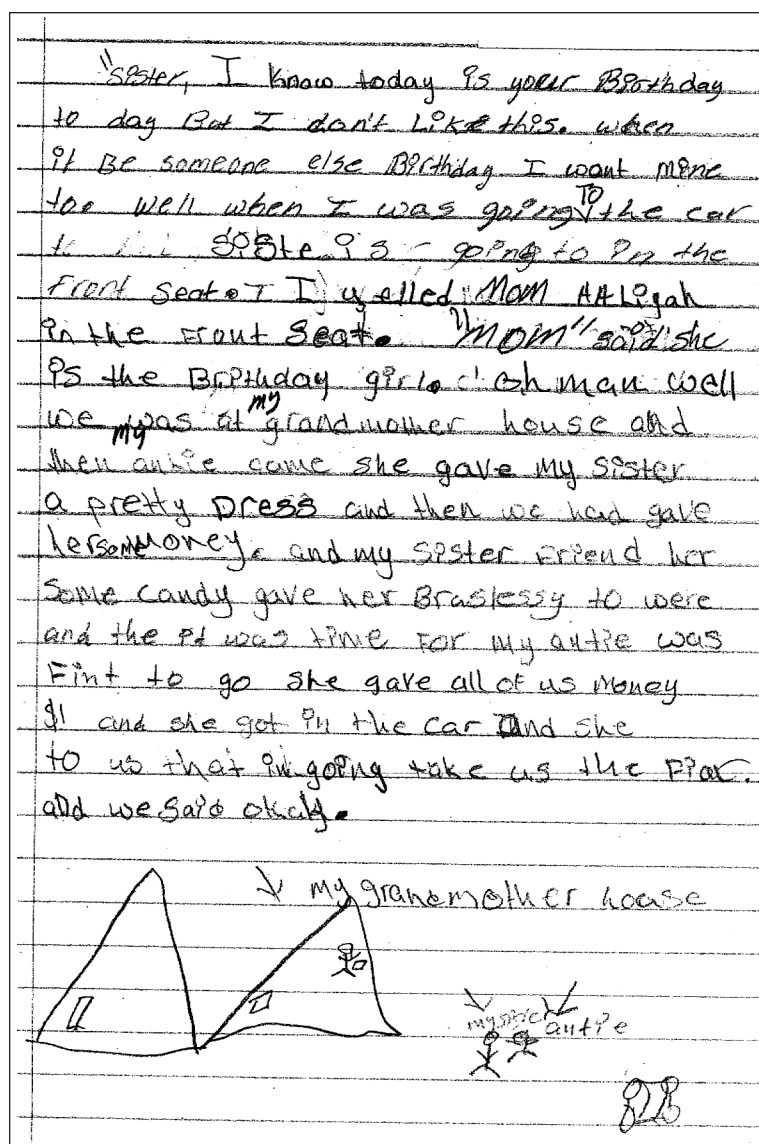


Figure 2. Aaliyah's birthday

learners with disabilities made considerable progress in their writing development within the same amount of time, even though their abilities in writing varied greatly. In this conclusion, we would like to focus our discussion on what Nancy did to make this inclusion model work in her classroom. We believe that the teacher matters the most in any instruction, and that her belief in attending to the needs of *all* students and her practices, played out in well-designed instruction, are the driving force behind student achievement. We agree with Corbett (2001) that an inclusive pedagogy, a *connective pedagogy*, must "relate to individual needs, instructional resources and to community values" (p. xiv).

Realizing it was easy for her students with special needs to feel excluded, Nancy settled on community building as her first task when the school year started. She read aloud books with a theme of respecting and accepting each other despite individual differences in class. Nancy addressed the motto "Treat everyone equally" throughout the year and modeled it in her practice by trying to meet with all her students on a regular basis, pointing out anything positive in their class behavior or in their writing. In addition, Nancy structured the workshop so that students had time and space to work with each other. During writing, the students were allowed to change seats and choose to work with anyone as long as they stayed on task. This self-selected partnership strategy made sharing much easier, especially at the beginning of the school year when many students hadn't gained enough comfort in the community or in Nancy's instructional approach. All the students in this class benefited a great deal by directly working with other students and by their peers' influence on their writing.

In addition to reading literature to and with her students, Nancy also led her students in book discussions, during which the students shared their personal connections to the reading. This sharing not only prepared the students for their writing, it also helped them connect with each other and to the teacher, through which they realized they shared much in common

while also exhibiting diverse talents and interests. Even though Michelle struggled as a writer at the beginning, she consistently shared during book talks; her peers knew she had much to say and used information she had shared to make suggestions for her writing. Their appreciation of Michelle's oral story demonstrated that Michelle was valued as one of them in the community.

Norwich states (1996) that the framework of inclusion attempts to take into account the "sameness" of students while at the same time paying due regard to "difference" and "diversity" among individuals. The nine students, though identified with a special education label, were different in their abilities, disabilities, learning styles, habits, and attitudes. Nancy understood each of her stu-

dents were different individuals: *equal* didn't mean *same* (Nieto, 1996). For example, she allowed Michelle to draw her name and scribble during writing time for a while, giving her the time and space needed to get used to working on her own. Nancy understood all her students were experiencing the writing workshop for the first time, not just the nine students with special needs, and they were all struggling in some way. Each student worked at a different pace, and each was challenged appropriately. Her students with special needs especially benefited from this flexibility, as they were expected only to improve based on their own performance, not that of their peers. However, each time a student shared a finished piece with the class, the example inspired others to do the same. When Michelle completed her first story, the class as a whole complimented her, as if the progress belonged to the community—which was true in some sense, as it was through much nurturing in the community that Michelle got to this point as a writer. This is what Nielsen (1997) recommends when creating an inclusive classroom: a supportive atmosphere where “everyone is cooperating to achieve group goals and is primarily concerned with the success of the group as a whole” (p. 9). This sense of being part of the group academically made Michelle, for the first time, connect rather than disconnect with the school.

Nancy formed her belief in writing workshop in her Master Certification program. Working with Danling on this project deepened her understanding of writing instruction and her belief in teaching a process approach to writing. In addition to seeing a writing workshop approach as an effective model for teaching writing, Nancy believed in teaching writers *before* teaching writing, which significantly helped all her students. Michelle's growth as a writer within four and a half months clearly demonstrates effective practice grounded by this belief. Nancy posited that in order for her students to write, they needed first to realize that they all have stories to tell, and their everyday lives were worth sharing with others (Graves, 2003). She worked hard to help her students understand that all writers struggle through messy drafts and that revision is necessary (Mur-

ray, 2005). This realization greatly benefited her students with special needs, since they often thought they were the only ones who struggled with learning. Listening to their peers' frustration through first drafts and unfinished or unpolished work made the students with special needs feel connected to their peers as learners and writers. As demonstrated in this study, Michelle's close relationship with Alyson was vital to her development as a writer. In addition, Nancy valued and acknowledged every small step her students took toward becoming writers: telling their own stories, attempting a skill for the first time, and trying a new technique or genre, even though they might make a mistake.

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**Nancy knew that before her students could write well, they needed courage to take risks, a willingness to ask for and offer help, and an open mind about messy writing as their work began.**

mind about messy writing as their work began. In order to help them develop these qualities as writers, Nancy purposefully neglected their mechanic skills at first, and focused her attention on communicating content and ideas. For some students, continuous writing

for ten minutes was a big step, and for others, writing a paragraph was a mountainous struggle. Michelle, for whom previous writing experiences had emphasized only doing it “correctly,” writing was difficult on several levels. Once she started to develop the above-described qualities, however, she was ready to work on skills that would help her to express meaning, try new techniques, and generally make her writing more interesting. Before Michelle had confidence as a writer, working on conventional skills would be overwhelming and frustrating to the point that she felt, “I can't write.” This concurs with what Manset and Semmel (1997) recommend, for Nancy's classroom ecology supported higher-order cognitive development; first, though, it was necessary to focus on developing social skills and a sense of community within a language-rich environment.

Nancy's beliefs about teaching writing also determined how she assessed her students' progress. She assessed their overall development as “writers as communicators,” including their abil-

ity to choose topics, to write for a sustained time period, to work with peers, to be willing to work on multiple drafts, and to know where and how to ask for help. She evaluated their understanding of various genres and their ability to write for different purposes and audiences. Finally, she expected to see targeted improvement in conventional writing skills. Her ongoing assessment of her students as writers guided her instruction each day, and informed her decisions regarding what books to read with the class and what concepts and skills to teach.

Nancy stood out in her school as an instructor who held onto her beliefs and her determination to teach what was best for her students. The tensions that exist in schools to teach “proven” methods or programs were alive in Nancy’s school. This project was an effort to break away from “teaching to the test” and to help students with special needs become writers by letting them write without drilling them on basic skills. Because of Nancy’s past successful teaching experience (including her students’ high test scores), her administrators cautiously, but with some reservation, left her alone. They asked her to turn in her lesson plans, and also came to her room periodically to check on her teaching. In addition, her students were required to participate in the demand prompts that were used to monitor students’ progress. Her colleagues were watching her quietly from a distance: they admired her courage, but worried—what if her students’ test scores dropped? Before high-stakes test scores came out, they all held their breath, anxiously waiting.

Basing teaching on her understanding of writing philosophy, Nancy believed that as long as she helped all of her students grow steadily as writers, they should have certain skills and confidence in learning no matter if they tested well or not. In the spring, Michelle, as well as several other students with special needs (6 out of 9), achieved passing scores on the state writing test; more important, they became writers alongside their peers. The overall progress of Nancy’s students gives credence to the belief that teachers matter most in effective instruction (Cunningham & Allington, 2003). It is Nancy’s beliefs about teaching and learning, her knowledge of writing instruction, and her practice centered around students that made the inclusion model work in her room. Nan-

cy’s children were truly her guides, a collective resource that influenced her planning for what and how she should teach them all. When the focus of our teaching is on each individual student—not on books, teaching materials, testing, a set of skills or standards—then our teaching will be effective.

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