

Finding His Sparkle: Helping Students Find Their Voice

Categories: Writing

A New Student

In January, as often happens in our district, I got a new student into my class. He is an English learner at the early advanced level. At home he is called by his Chinese name but at school he wants to be called Daniel. When he arrived, I noticed he was an observer. He's the sort of child who does not dive right into social situations but is acutely aware of the interactions around him. After the first week it was also clear to me that he was very hardworking and more serious than most seven year olds. His academic skills were strong if somewhat rote, as if creativity and problem-solving might not have been emphasized in the curriculum in his last school.

Of course, I don't know that for sure but I inferred it from his lack of confidence in art, creative problem solving, and writing. As the weeks went on, Daniel slipped seamlessly into the social life of the classroom, accepted by peers and finding friends with whom he could reveal a bit more of himself. Academically he excelled for the most part but seemed a bit baffled by the partner work, questioning, inquiry, and creative commotion that are dominant in the fabric of my classroom.

Just the Facts, Ma'am

Daniel came to me with the technical skills of a writer. He could spell beautifully, was gaining a firmer grasp on the slippery matter of verb tenses, knew when to capitalize, could write complete sentences, and relished finding my mistakes in our daily editing session during the Morning Message. The writing Daniel produced was correct and accurate but lacked that sparkle that I hope to encourage in kids. Whether he was writing about science or literature or a narrative piece about a weekend play date, Daniel wrote the facts. He quickly learned to add more details when encouraged but I realized he had not found his storytelling voice.

The Storytelling Voice

This voice is a difficult thing to teach. It can't be easily taught in a mini-lesson or a unit. During the last couple of years, I have struggled to figure how to elucidate for my students the storytelling voice. I point out this narrative thread to my students constantly-when we read literature, when they read their own writing or listen to a peer's, or when I encourage them to turn the urgent oral story about something that happened yesterday into a written piece. Sometimes, children have heard it all their lives and some kids speak in "story." But other students may have heard this voice without ever trying it out themselves. Daniel just hadn't had much experience in being the storyteller.

Supporting EL Students

Twice a week during writing time, our wonderful ELD teacher, Ms. Ashley, comes to support my English learners. While they are all at different levels of English proficiency, they are all relatively fluent orally and read reasonably well. For all of them, as for most English learners, writing is the last of the four areas of English language that they continue to find challenging. Ms. Ashley and I have developed a "push-in" model in which the English learners participate with the rest of class during writing times. She circulates among

them, helping them with anything they need. Most often she scaffolds them in the generation of ideas, organizing their sequence, using more descriptive language, and gaining the courage to share their work in Author's Chair. When Daniel arrived, Ms. Ashley checked in with him but didn't spend as much time with him because he was so independent and capable.

Shortly after Daniel arrived came the burst of "survey" writing in my classroom. He jumped in enthusiastically. Soon after, I noticed that a few children were asking if they could write "made-up" stories. Not about to pass on that creative energy, Ms. Ashley and I talked about how to encourage fiction writing. She came up with a great graphic organizer to get children started and modeled how to use it in a group writing activity. Soon our writers were off to the fictional races.

Finding His Sparkle

At first Daniel dutifully filled out a graphic organizer. He wrote the names of characters, figured out a setting, and pondered a problem and solution. Somewhere in this process, I'm imagining he realized that there was not a "right" answer that fit in these boxes. By design he had to "make up" the answers. After talking with a partner, he began to see that he really could write about anything.

That realization set his mind free. Daniel wrote a rollicking story about an epic battle between a giant snake and a giant robot with civilization hanging in the balance. True to his love of facts, Daniel pored over a book about snakes to research all the kinds of snakes who did battle with the robot. He described just which fellow vipers the snakes had on their side:

The snakes had rattle snakes, king cobras, pythons, adders, boa constrictors, cotton mouths, gaboon vipers, lebetine vipers, taipan, and egg-eating snakes.

In the end, his story was dramatic, detailed, and completely original. Without need for fanfare or recognition, Daniel had found his sparkle and was very satisfied, indeed.