

“... wait until you see my writing!

Come on. I want to show you....”

—ALEX, A YOUNG WRITER



Create an “I Can Do It!” Learning Environment

SUCCESS STORIES ABOUT STUDENTS WHO HAVE broken the cycle of failure have convinced me that once students believe “I can do it!” anything is possible. Again and again, I have seen remarkable changes in students once they achieve something they previously thought impossible. That triumph changes everything.

In *Writing Essentials* (2005), I tell the story of Owen, whom I met during a weeklong writing residency. From the time Owen entered school, he experienced great difficulty academically and behaviorally. In kindergarten, his teacher recommended him for special education. Although his mother refused that placement, expectations for Owen remained extremely low, and, predictably, he produced little. For example, in first grade, his teacher only expected him to complete one-sentence “story starters.”

So it was a huge surprise to the observing teachers when in mid-February during my residency, second grader Owen volunteered to tell his “Secrets of Second Graders” story aloud and then went on to write a complete story that included a beginning, middle, and end, as well as humor, a good lead, a satisfying conclusion, conversation, telling details, and interesting word choices. He had it all, all because I made no assumptions about what he couldn’t do (I didn’t know his

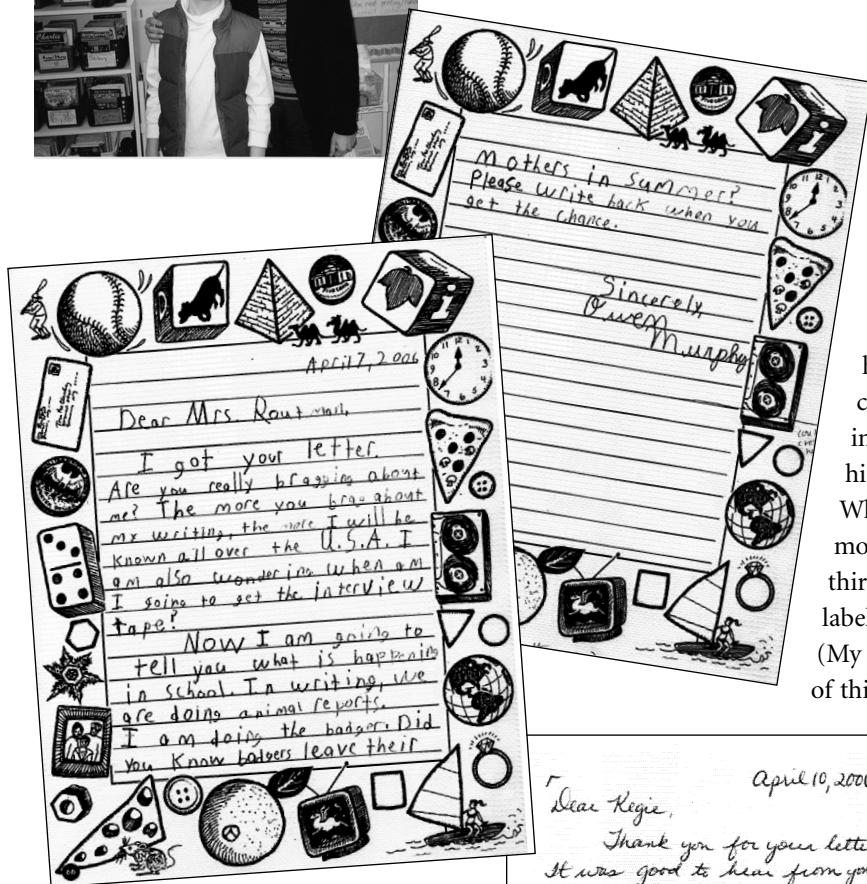
“*I can do it rised up. I can’t do it went to its grave.*”

—OWEN, A THIRD
GRADER ON BECOMING
A WRITER



history). I assumed he was just as capable as the child sitting next to him, and indeed he was, and is. I helped him tell his story first, scaffolded his ideas and conversation, encouraged him as he wrote independently, and then celebrated his success.

Owen was transformed as a learner forever. I know, because I've followed his progress from second grade through fifth grade. Not only has he continued to improve, he is a confident student who enjoys learning and who now achieves at or close to grade level in all curricular areas. (See the samples of his teacher's letter and his letter to me.) Owen's story is a cautionary one. Had he been placed in special education in kindergarten, his life would have been very different. When I interviewed Owen and his mother after Owen had completed third grade, she urged teachers not to label children or give up on them. (My website contains a video clip of this interview.)



Here is Owen and his letter to me (see above), brimming with pride. His teacher's letter (right) confirms his amazing progress and the support he's received schoolwide.

Dear Regie,
 April 10, 2006
 Thank you for your letter. It was good to hear from you! I shared your picture and letter with Owen. He was happy to receive it and immediately sat down to write back to you. When he was finished, I thought how this was a good example of how the audience makes a difference. This is because he wrote a fine letter without any assistance and he was excited to do it. I've also enclosed a final copy, which he wrote after we talked and he did some editing.

Our CSAP testing is finished and I am glad it is behind us. The students worked very

hard! When I glanced at Owen's test booklet I thought he did fairly well. I'll be surprised if he's not proficient in writing this year. I'm hopeful anyway! We just completed our spring conferences and we're experiencing wonderful spring weather. There is definitely a case of spring fever in the classroom. My student teacher is solving and I'm finding myself with more time to work with individual students. Having a student teacher has been eye opening and a positive experience. I am missing doing all of the teaching however, and am looking forward to working back into teaching. Hope you and your family are all well. Love, Cami

Let Students Know: “I Will Help You Discover the Possibilities”

It’s five years ago. After my dad’s brutal stroke he’s had follow-up surgery to stop massive bleeding in his brain. He has tubes everywhere, is too sick to be placed in a nursing home, and needs the intensive care a combined rehab facility and hospital can provide. We arrange to have him flown by air ambulance from his long-time home of New York City to our new home city, Seattle, and he arrives depleted and depressed. His doctor tells us (to our dismay in front of him):

Your dad has had a very, very severe stroke, and it will take months and months for him to progress. It will be at least several months till the feeding tube can come out because his swallowing mechanism is so weak.

Because of rules that don’t make sense to us and that we don’t understand, my dad can only stay at the current rehab facility for a month. Frank and I are frantic to find him a full-care facility. A nursing home seems our only option; yet he can’t enter one if he still has the tracheotomy in his throat, which helps him breathe. We have not been told if or when that mechanism might come out.

Then we hear about the ventilators. Nationally, about seven out of ten people who are on a ventilator (a breathing device) never get off of it, but in this hospital, more than 70 percent of the patients have their ventilators permanently removed. The therapist who tells us this says that the hospital’s patients on ventilators are all taken on weekly local outings—to the zoo, public market, parks, beaches, and so on. They see there is life outside the hospital, and that motivates them to work harder with the doctors and physical therapists.

We take that story to heart, and we instill hope. We tell my dad how important he is to our lives and that his grandchildren, especially, need him as a role model. We tell him that although he is physically disabled, his mind is fine and he can still have a good life. We promise to be there for him and make frequent visits a priority in our life. He works daily with the therapist, and the “trach” is removed in two weeks! His feeding tube comes out just a few weeks later.

I have no doubt it was seeing possibilities for his future that made him work so hard with his excellent therapists to achieve this positive result so quickly. It is the same with our students. We have to show

them—through demonstrations, shared experiences, guided practice, helpful feedback, and ongoing assessment and encouragement—that, yes, they can be writers, readers, mathematicians, scientists, artists, chefs, dancers. They can be anything they want to be. We have to tell them—through our words, actions, and attitudes—“I will help you discover the possibilities.”

Ensure That **All Voices** Are Heard

Everywhere I teach, I find that students’ voices have been silenced. There has been no conspiracy or plan: it happens because we teachers do most of the talking and because we fail to recognize the importance of each student’s voice being heard and the value of deliberated talk for deep thinking and learning. When students speak so softly that we cannot hear them, it is often because they don’t believe they have anything worthwhile to say.

When I call on second grader Desiree after a turn-and-talk during an interactive read-aloud (see page 66), her voice is a whisper. Even with encouragement, she will not speak louder. I try hard not to repeat what students say (it sends the message that they don’t need to listen to their peers), but today it is necessary. I make it a priority to get her voice into the classroom conversation, and each day her voice grows louder and more confident. By the end of the week, we can hear her. She is smiling more and stopping to hug me each day before I leave. (See Desiree’s evaluation of her learning in Chapter 4, p. 69.)

We teachers need to set up and structure our learning environment to encourage participation that supports students’ approximations and responses. Turn-and-talk shared writing, scribing responses in small-group work, self-directed literature conversations, collaborative group work, and shared writing experiences are all great ways to promote students’ voices and thinking so all are heard and valued.

Act and Speak Respectfully

Treating students respectfully is an obligation, an unspoken pledge we take when we become teachers. I am therefore surprised whenever teachers comment: “You were respectful to every student. You didn’t raise your voice. You were firm but you were kind and encouraging.” Our students deserve no less.

“Our students discern whether or not we think they are capable and are advocating for them. They and we learn best in an environment where it is safe to take a risk and make a mistake.”

The words we use, our tone of voice, and our body language speak volumes about our true attitudes toward our students, their families, and our colleagues. Our students discern whether or not we think they are capable and are advocating for them. They and we learn best in an environment where it is safe to take a risk and make a mistake.

Nobody is disrespectful to kids because she or he believes it’s the right way to treat them. We get stressed out, have a bad day, or feel overworked and tired. Staff members need to support one another by being careful about the way we talk about kids among ourselves. We need to make it a habit to avoid negative talk about students in the staff room or team meetings. Negative talk and feelings can carry over into the classroom. Showing respect is a worthy effort. Our students can’t learn well without it.

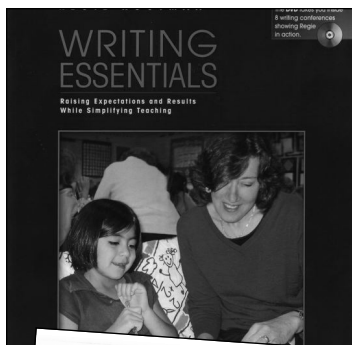
One of the first things I do after I meet a new group of students is consciously work on pronouncing each student’s name correctly. It is a sign of respect every person deserves. Because all the students are new to me, I have each child wear a nametag bearing his or her first name. I tell them, “I always want to call you by your correct name. Names are important, and if I mispronounce your name, please tell me right away, so I get it right.”

How we speak to and about our colleagues also lets them know whether we value them. My best advice is simple: speak and act exactly the way you expect people you love and respect to speak to you and members of your family—with kindness and caring and in a nonjudgmental manner. A positive tone conveys to students and to fellow teachers, “I respect who you are. I will do everything I can to support you.”

Demonstrate the Power of Writing

Teachers are often surprised to see their low-performing students find their voices and confidence through writing. Once we tap into a child’s interests and provide the necessary demonstrations and support to help him write, success can come quickly. I’ve seen a child change before my eyes in demeanor, facial expression, eye contact, voice level, and posture, once he is genuinely celebrated for his writing. The child looks different because he feels different; he is now a writer. Even when a child has experienced years of failure, it is still possible to break that pattern—especially by focusing on a writing topic that matters to the child.

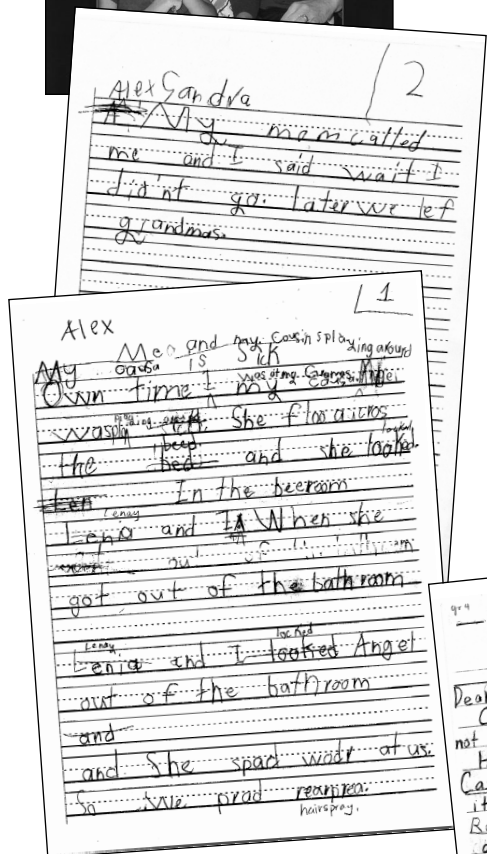
I’ve thought a lot about why writing has the power to transform a child in a way I’ve rarely seen happen with reading. I think it’s because in



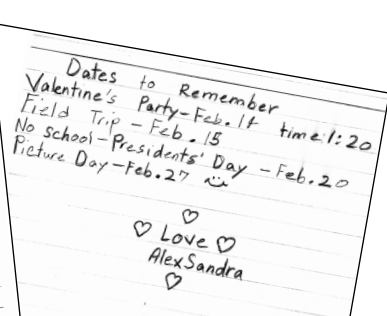
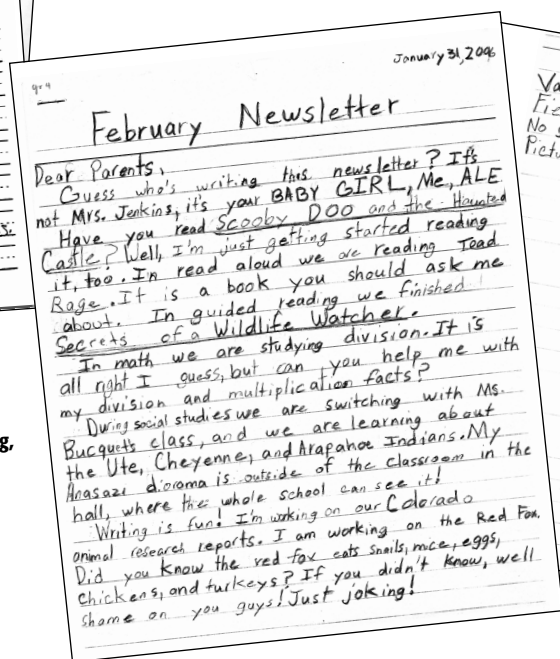
reading the book acts as a mediator: the words are already on the page and give the reader some support. In writing, the student confronts a blank screen or page and has to create the entire text, which is far scarier for many kids. So the triumph in writing, when it comes, is 100% the child's; the entire creation has come from the writer's hard won efforts. And for many students, writing success comes quickly, often faster than reading success does. With excellent teaching and a focus on the writer first and the writing second, a student can sometimes make the leap into writing in a single day. The child, initially downtrodden and unconfident, begins to view himself as capable, and that capability gradually extends to other areas. Owen's story (pp. 17–18) is one example of this transformation. AlexSandra's is another.

AlexSandra is the second-grade student on the cover of *Writing Essentials* (Routman, 2005). She is also featured in the writing conference on the accompanying DVD. The conference shows a shy English language learner who is struggling hard, even with much support, to tell and write an organized, meaningful story.

Two years later at a subsequent writing residency in her school, an exuberant AlexSandra flags me down in the hallway: "Mrs. Routman, wait until you see my writing! Come on. I want to show you, and I also want us to take a picture together." After two years of excellent teaching and meaningful daily writing, Alex's writing looks like any other competent fourth grader's. Alex beams with an "I can do it!" spirit.



AlexSandra, once struggling, is now an accomplished fourth grader.



Do More Writing for Valued Audiences and Purposes

In a fourth-grade classroom in which the students saw writing as a “school thing” and typical writing samples looked like second-grade work, students were stunned when I told them the persuasive letters they were about to write would be mailed. “You mean we’re really going to actually send these, put stamps on them and mail them?” several asked. Sadly, my experience has been that too often students view writing assignments as either “for the teacher” or “for the bulletin board.”

I described the long persuasive letter I had just written to a Seattle hospital detailing the positive aspects of my father’s recent stay and then also focusing on the many things that went seriously wrong and caused my dad to suffer needlessly. I provided specific recommendations for improving services for all patients and sent copies of my letter to patient care and specific doctors and nurses. I told students about the two letters I received back in return, the first a prompt reply from the chief operating officer and the chief medical doctor, thanking me for my letter and telling me an investigation of what I had reported would take place. Finally, I showed them the follow-up three-page letter telling me the specific changes the hospital was putting in place. I let students know that carefully written letters, positively worded, are taken seriously. Who did they want to persuade so that a practice or policy might be changed?

After much discussion, it became clear that most students were upset about a kickball rule on the playground during morning and lunch recess. Miss Vicky, the playground supervisor, whom the children liked and respected, had established a one-out rule that they wanted changed to three outs. All students had an opportunity to revise the letter with a partner or small group, which gave each of them a voice and also gave us teachers a record of their work and thinking. After a brief whole-class discussion with input from each group, the letter was revised and hand-delivered to Miss Vicky. (The shared writing draft, revision work, and final letter are shown on the next page.)

Miss Vicky came into the room a short time later and, with a smile, thanked the students for their letter, which she had in her hand. She explained in detail why the three-out rule would not work. I was expecting her to be impressed with the children’s carefully worded, polite letter and at least offer to try out their suggestion. The room went silent. Not one student, not one of the many observing teachers, nor the principal (who was also observing) said anything. I was stunned by those silenced voices. Miss Vicky was about to leave the room.

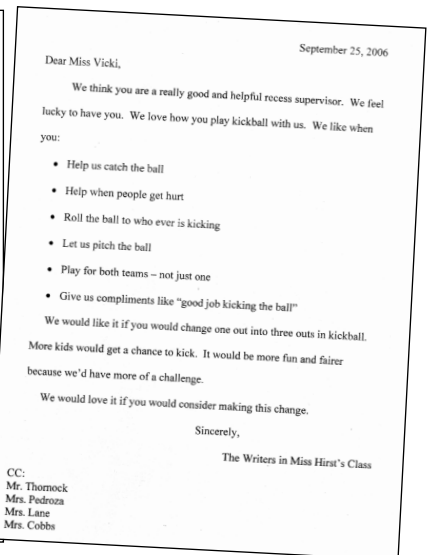
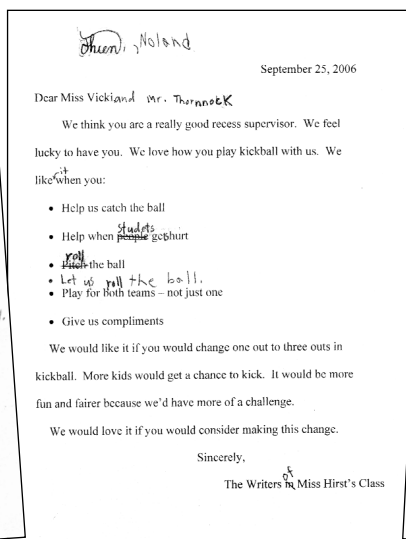
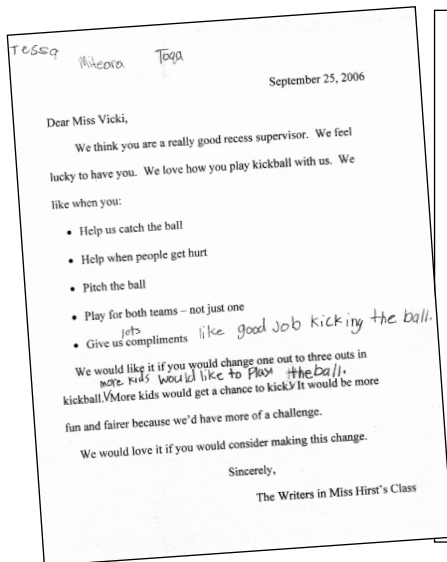
Our shared writing draft, small-group revisions, and final letter showed the importance of writing for a purpose.



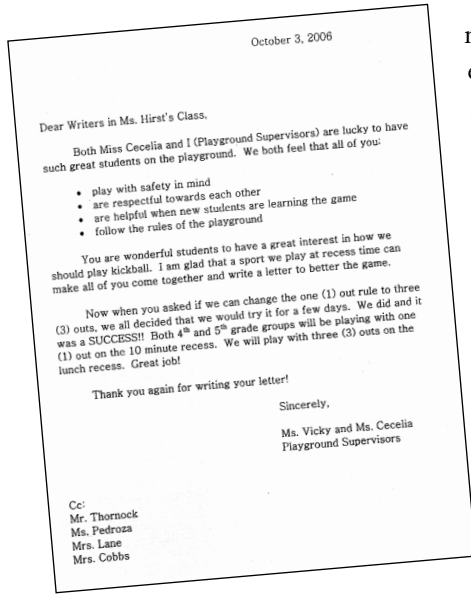
“Kids,” I said, “your whole life you’re going to have people telling you what you can’t do. If you just give up, you’ll never accomplish your dreams. You were all pretty passionate about why you wanted that one-out rule changed. Tell Miss Vicky how you feel.” Slowly, the students came to life. They began to speak in turn, very quietly at first. To each, Miss Vicky responded with a reason the change wouldn’t work. Her seeming inflexibility surprised me, but I encouraged the students to keep speaking their minds. Finally, one young man offered, “How about if we keep the one-out rule during our short morning recess but try the three-outs rule during the longer lunch recess?” I thought to myself, “This guy has a future as a mediator or a lawyer.” And Miss Vicky said, “Now that’s an idea we could try.” The children were elated.



True to her word, Miss Vicky tried out the children’s suggestion and found it worked. In her letter back to them, she followed their format,



Miss Vicky’s response validated the students’ efforts.



first positively stating the qualities she likes about them—using bullets, just as they had—before addressing the main issue. At the bottom left, she copied her letter to others, just as the students had done.

When the students went on to write persuasive letters—to family members, businesses, teachers, and so on—they took the task seriously, energized by the realization that their letter had the possibility of garnering the desired effect. They willingly revised and edited, and many of them did their best writing to date.

I believe that effective teaching is about hearing all the voices—making sure that every student is valued, heard, and respected and knows that his or her voice can make a difference. Many students have no idea about the power of the written word. Once they experience it, their lives are forever changed. This phenomenon is equally true in schools where most students come from families of affluence. Often I have found that high test scores coexist with scant student interest in writing, low engagement, and little understanding of audience and purpose.

Here’s a typical story. When I’ve asked students to write to a family member at holiday time (as a gift to the person) recalling a special time with the mom or dad or requesting something (that doesn’t cost money), many from families of affluence ask for more time with mom or dad—a request I’ve rarely seen from children of low-income families. This emotional impoverishment is as heartbreaking as any other poverty I encounter in schools; I have learned that all schools are “high needs” in different ways. The children who wrote the gift letters to their parents have every “thing” they could ever want, except the gift of time with a parent. When some of these earnest, carefully written letters got the desired effect, students—and some teachers, too—saw the power of writing, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

Use Writing as a Way into Reading

Midyear, in a kindergarten classroom where many of the students were second language learners and came from families with low incomes, we used writing as a way into reading: we used it to teach phonemic awareness, phonics, and word work; validate students’ life stories; and create an “I can do it!” spirit.

Although the children had been doing some writing almost daily, that writing had focused primarily on letters and sounds and writing a structured sentence. Teachers had assumed that kindergarten kids first needed to know just about all their letters and sounds before they could be expected to write stories (an assumption they later revised). When I



These kindergarten students are writing independently.

told my story about our cat Norman and how my husband Frank liked to feed her fancy tuna fish, not just dry cat food, the children were emboldened by my simple, close-to-home topic, and eager to tell and write their own stories. I thought aloud and wrote that Norman story on chart paper with the students looking on, so kids could see how a writer thinks through ideas and chooses favorite details as they write a first draft. After demonstrations, scaffolded conversations to help students tell their stories in detail, and ample time spent writing together, conferring, and celebrating, students were able to write meaningful stories fairly independently. The teachers and the principal who were observing were amazed at what *all* the students were able to do, including the many students who spoke Spanish as their first language. By the end of the school year, just about every student had acquired phonemic awareness without a specialized phonemic awareness program. In fact, their scores on the “Hearing Sounds in Words” test (Clay, 2002) surpassed district averages.

Perhaps the biggest benefit came later. At the end of the school year, almost all these kindergartners, including the English language learners, were readers. This was a remarkable first! The classroom teacher, reading specialist, and principal credited the daily story writing—which required lots of reading and rereading of text plus lots of word work (slowly stretching out words while saying them aloud, hearing sounds in words, and applying letters to those sounds)—as the pivotal factor.

I’ve seen it again and again; it is writing that turns children into readers. Meaningful word work based on students’ own writing can then be easily integrated into the teaching of reading and writing. Here are just a few ways you can get the writing-to-reading connection flowing:

- Word-process (with correct conventions) a child’s dictated or handwritten journal entries and turn them into a text.
- Take small-group shared writing pieces and read them first as a shared reading and then in guided and independent reading.
- Base literacy lessons on a class-authored text that has been read over and over again as a whole group and with a partner.

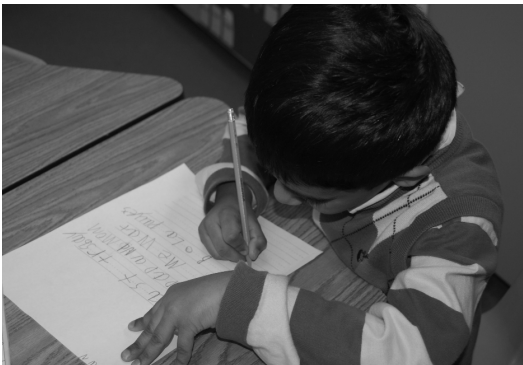
Particularly noteworthy is the dramatic impact writing, especially nonfiction writing, has on reading comprehension. I worked with Marlene Ellis for two successive years in her urban classroom, in which she taught the same group of students, as first graders and then again as second graders. At the beginning of grade 1, many of her students were struggling and could be considered “at-risk.” At the end of second grade, students’ scores on districtwide assessments indicated most were reading a year or more above grade level. By the beginning of third grade, many

of these students were so engaged in school that, according to their teacher, “everyone was a star.” Marlene credits the link between daily reading and writing (especially with a nonfiction emphasis), along with one hour of daily writing on topics they chose themselves, with these students’ high reading comprehension and achievement. She comments, “I’ve noticed that with increased nonfiction writing, there’s an increase in the desire to read nonfiction books.”

Do More Shared Reading from Shared Writing Texts

Class-authored narratives based on experiences that are relevant to the students are always easiest for them to read. This is particularly true for English language learners, who need familiar language to experience reading success. I often take these common texts and use them in differentiated instruction. For example, in the primary grades, inspired by a great read-aloud book, we might write a class book titled “What We’re Great At,” “Our Favorite Colors,” or “Classroom Procedures.” While students each get a copy of the published text—which typically has only one, two, or three lines of text on each student-authored page—they also get to extend the page they wrote.

Many teachers also turn texts written by their students into Readers’ Theatre scripts. The repeated reading increases students’ reading fluency and word recognition, and performing the scripts for others increases their confidence as readers. An added benefit is that fluency is modeled and practiced in a natural rather than a contrived way.



First-graders read (and do more writing) for their class-authored nonfiction text on plants.



Read and Write Texts That Embody an “I Can Do It!” Spirit

“We need to do everything we can to show students what is possible—through the stories we tell, read, and write with them and through the literature we use to teach reading and other core subjects.”

The statistics are staggering. Half our students in large cities fail to graduate from high school. Many of our young African American males are incarcerated. We have given up on a huge segment of society who have been made powerless in part through the failure of our educational system. We need to do everything we can to show students what is possible—through the stories we tell, read, and write with them and through the literature we use to teach reading and other core subjects.

In a third-grade classroom in which I was teaching students how to summarize and how to direct their own small-group literature conversations, I sought out excellent literature that would give these mostly economically poor Hispanic students hope and possibilities for the future. I did a shared read-aloud using the beautiful book *Rosa* by Nikki Giovanni (2005). Students heard and saw me think aloud and, with my guidance and scaffolding, had lots of opportunities to talk with one another and practice sharing their own thinking. Then heterogeneous groups of four or five signed up as a group to read, summarize, and discuss self-selected informational picture books about ordinary people who used extraordinary determination and hard work to make a big difference not only in their own lives but in the lives of others: Wilma Rudolph, Lou Gehrig, Celia Cruz, Caesar Chavez, Joe Louis, and others.

Similarly, in a fifth/sixth-grade classroom in a school where 85 percent of the students received a free or reduced-price lunch, we used the informational picture book *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds: The Sammy Lee Story* by Paula Yoo (2005), about an ordinary Korean who achieved great fame as an Olympic swimming champion and became a role model for what’s possible not just for Asian Americans but for all people who strive to overcome challenges and fulfill a dream.

Or again, in writing poetry in a sixth-grade classroom, a shared poem we composed on bullying, “No More Name Calling,” served as a crucial text for showing students that writing could be used to change behavior. Students stated how upset they were about the bullying and name calling they had been experiencing since kindergarten. Students orally contributed ideas to the collaborative poem while the teacher scribed and guided the composition. The students chose to enlarge the finished poem,

had every student sign it, and posted it in the classroom all year as the credo by which they would behave. Their classroom teacher said writing the poem was pivotal in convincing students they could make a difference.

Whenever I work in classrooms I bring a favorite book or two to read aloud to students and leave as a gift. Very often these are inspiring books in which the main character’s “I can do it!” spirit leads to important changes and accomplishments. (See www.regieroutman.com for a bibliography of some of my favorite “I Can Do It!” titles.)



Celebrate

I always include celebration as part of teaching as a way to show students—and teachers too—what’s possible. By celebration, I mean affirming, congratulating, showcasing, noticing, and making public the positive and specific actions and work learners have done or are attempting to do. In celebration, we focus on the learner’s strengths.

Cheer Students On

Essentially, celebration means being a cheerleader. When I coach teachers after I have demonstrated in their classrooms and we have also tried some things out together (shared demonstrations), I tell their students:

Today your teacher will be doing all the teaching, and I will be her cheerleader. That means I will be encouraging her. She has given me permission to interrupt her if I see something she might do or add that would be helpful to the lesson. Sometimes I might teach, or we might teach together, but my main role today is to cheer your teacher on.

Give Students Specific Praise

Celebration also means giving useful and precise feedback. For example the following language is purposely specific: “I noticed that Carl used really interesting words to describe how he plays with his dog. He didn’t just say, ‘I play with my dog.’ He said, ‘We wrestle. We lunge at each other.’ I can really picture that.” This kind of specific praise will have all the kids striving to use more interesting word choices in their writing. They will also be thinking, “If Carl can do that, so can I!”

Celebration of specific strengths—not idle praise—helps ensure early success for our students. Through whole-class sharing, small-group work, one-on-one conferences, and every other way we respond to students all day every day, we need to give them the message that they are capable.

Celebrate Small Accomplishments

Many of our students, especially the struggling ones, don't see their strengths and incremental improvements, so it's important to notice and point out what they have done well, even if it's a very small thing. These small celebrations can change the way learners view themselves and the way others view them. Often, those celebrations can even lead to increased engagement, confidence, and willingness to take risks. Time and time again, I have seen celebration jump-start greater learning and achievement. This is as true for us teachers as for students.

I will never forget a colleague telling me how devastated she was when her principal said to her, "I wish you could have done more with Jolene." My friend came to me in tears:

If only she had said, "Thank you for all your efforts with Jolene." I never worked harder with a student, but those words, "I wish you could have done more," caused me to retire a year early. I felt my efforts were unappreciated.

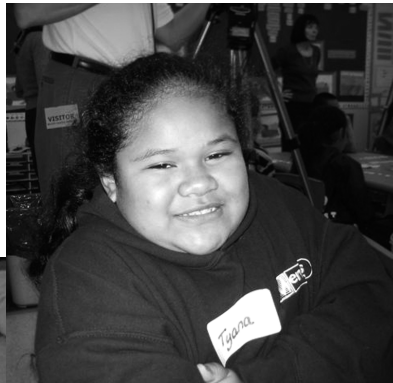
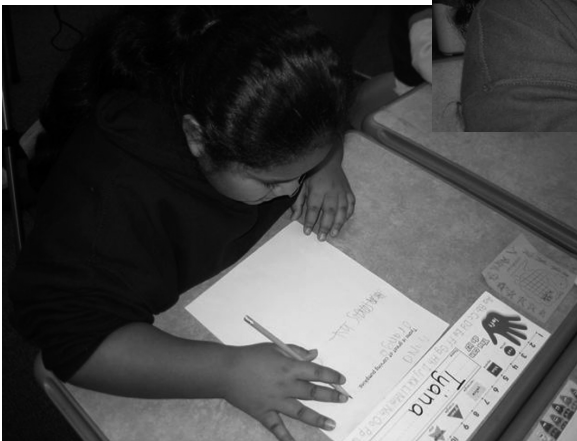
Noticing what's done well can change a child's life. In a first-grade classroom, in a school where thirty languages were spoken, I called Tyana, who was sitting off to the side, under a desk, to come to the front of the class to share her written story. Students had been asked to extend our

class text, "What We're Great At." As soon as Tyana began to move slowly toward the front of the classroom, I silently berated myself for selecting her. She was the largest student in the room, her eyes were downcast, and she projected a strong feeling of sadness. The last thing I wanted was to add to her discomfort.

Nevertheless, I asked her to read her story, which was about

carving a pumpkin. After she read it and I asked a few questions, I realized she had probably never carved a pumpkin. Choosing my words carefully, I said to her, "I can tell you like pumpkins and you would like to carve one. What do you like about pumpkins?" From there, I helped her orally rehearse a few sentences about pumpkins, and she went back and wrote them down. Then I followed up with more celebration, giving Tyana specific

Tyana grew as a writer when we found a common purpose and celebrated her efforts.



comments about the work she had done: “Good for you. You took the sentences we were talking about and got them down on your paper.”

Over the course of the weeklong residency, all of the teachers in the classroom noticed a huge change in Tyana’s demeanor. She began to smile; she sat closer to the front of the room when the class gathered on the rug; she joined in as the students responded to shared experiences. She moved from making herself invisible to visible, and she did it on her own once she felt affirmed.

Make Celebration Part of Everything You Do

Celebration is about finding the joy in teaching and learning and “seeing” the child’s accomplishments, no matter how small. When kids hear you compliment a student honestly, they will be thinking, “If she cares that much about so-and-so, she must also care that much about me,” or, “She thinks what so-and-so did was terrific. I can do that too.”

Celebration is not a frill. It’s an essential part of all effective teaching. In my school residencies I always start the week by talking about the importance of celebration. At one school, first-grade teacher Mary Yuhas later told me what she and others were thinking:

When you first talked about celebration, we were all thinking, “We don’t have time for that joy thing. We have the standards, required curriculum, and we’re stretched to the limit.” But by the end of the week, we saw that the joy thing was everything.

Let the celebrations begin—and continue!

