Teaching in the primary grades has been and continues to be the most eye-opening, rewarding, and unpredictable experience of my life. Now in my fourth year of teaching, I am amazed at the number of lessons I am taught during a normal week. Today, the lesson I was most proud of flopped and the lesson I threw together was a smash hit. The most important lessons, however, I’ve learned from my students.

One of the most powerful of these lessons occurred in my second year of teaching. I had followed my class to second grade. We were fortunate to be staying together for another year because we had learned to work well together and we knew our routines. That is, except for one student. James entered my first grade class the previous year with no knowledge of the alphabet and no interest in learning. He was opposed to most of my directions and consistently distracted others to get attention. James hadn’t learned to seek attention for the good things he could do. My opinion of a good day for James was one where he sat in his chair for an entire work period or finished a school day without hurting himself or someone else. I actually remember feeling relieved on the days when he was absent.

Now a second grader, James started off the year with this same behavior. He acted out for attention or tried to hide when asked to perform. Everything was hard for James because he had spent his first two years of school (kindergarten and first grade) in his own world, unwilling to attempt simple tasks, treating his education as a game. His parents, who had negative opinions about remedial programs, refused to let him get extra help outside of the classroom; retention was not an option. My assistant spent most of her time helping James one on one with daily assignments. He was gradually gaining knowledge of numbers by using manipulatives but he did not read and he did not write. He resisted both.

Although James did not read, he sometimes enjoyed having stories read to him. If he continued to be interested, I felt that he could become a reader. Writing, however, seemed hopeless. Nothing worked. I would give numerous prompts and spend hours modeling how to write stories. Our frequent school-wide writing activities would include three choices as possible writing topics. But the most I could
get from James was a word he knew or maybe a simple drawing. When given the chance to tell a story while I wrote down his words, he still produced little or nothing. Though I was struggling to turn James into a writer, the rest of my class was progressing well. I was proud to see the work I did was paying off, my ideas and examples echoed.

It is usually difficult to recall how it happens, but teachers who are constantly seeking ways to help students finally stumble upon teaching tools they aren’t expecting. My tool, finally, was an understanding of James’ experiences and interests. To make simple conversation with James was a struggle, but on one occasion I found a connection. Hopeful that I wouldn’t end up with the usual dead-end conversation, I had asked James about common second grade experiences like camping, sports, music, games, birthdays. My plan was to stimulate ideas for his story. I don’t recall if I asked or if he offered, but he told me about watching movies with his father. The movie he remembered best was “A Nightmare on Elm Street” starring Freddy Krueger, a horrid-looking fictional character who slashed his victims with the knives he had in place of fingers. This was one of the bloodiest, most frightening movies to come out of the ’80s. I cringed at the thought of discussing James’ favorite slasher movie as a writing topic, but it was the first thing he’d shared about himself in more than a year.

James had seen the entire “A Nightmare on Elm Street” series. Luckily, I had seen the original version when I was in high school. As James spoke about the movie, I constructed a story-planning web of his ideas on paper with his father at the center. I gave Freddy Krueger his space on one section of the web, hopeful that there would be other father and son activities to include. James and I finished the story web, our main idea, a movie never meant for the eyes of a child. He never told of other activities he had shared with his father. It was difficult, but we worked with our topic and, at the end of four days, James had his first complete story. He was proud and so was I. This shared experience marked the beginning of James’ journey to become a writer. Starting with an idea based on a life event and turning it into words that made a story created confidence in James that I hadn’t seen before. Throughout the year he grew as a writer, bringing new experiences with him, telling new stories. As his teacher I could have refused to allow James to use a horror film as a writing topic. I am glad I didn’t.
Since this experience, I have spent less time thinking of clever writing topics for my students and more time letting them create stories based on their own experiences. This has given them more freedom to express themselves, and it has given me more time to enjoy the amazing diversity of ideas that can be generated by a group of seven and eight year olds.

Demanding that my students write about my topics means missing out on one of the most wonderful parts of being a second grade teacher. During writing, what was once one idea is now twenty-five. On any given day of writer’s workshop, children may be writing letters, poetry, animal reports, recipes, and fairy tales. To the untrained eye it may seem like chaos; to mine it’s harmony. Our writing journals are always available to the student who doesn’t have a story to write at the moment, just thoughts and feelings. Also, I’ve created a take-home journal in which my students communicate with their parents. Parents respond by writing in the journal and returning it to school. The harmony of the writer’s workshop doesn’t come without a price. We must spend a lot of time early in the school year developing the writing genres and creating a strong foundation of responsibility and independence. Managing the writer’s workshop is maddening if you’re alone. Every person in the room, regardless of height, should share the responsibility.

In the past, while some students have flourished under my writing instruction, others may have been stifled. Now, I find creative ways to find the topics already within them. The benefit of approaching writing instruction in this way is that I find my students are less resistant to writing. With all of the material I must force on my students, it’s nice to have on-going opportunities to allow children to be empowered by choice. Children who are given a suggestion and run with it become more confident and imaginative thinkers. The freedom I am able to provide to my students in their writing takes advantage of the fact that every child is different. Not only do their experiences differ, but their interpretations of their experiences do as well.

At the moment when James began to open up to me, I sensed that he was expecting to be rejected as he had been so many times before. My acceptance of and interest in his writing topic may have surprised him. It was at his moment of success in creating a story that James’ defenses against learning and authority began to weaken. I am happy
that something finally clicked inside James which opened up the previously blocked path to his growth as a writer. Something finally clicked inside me as well after that walk down Elm Street. I now value the story inside the child more than I ever have before.