Jerry: A Special Education Student Discovers Writing and Reading

Twenty-seven students is a big group of fourth graders. As I began to get to know this group and their capabilities at the beginning of my fifth year of teaching, I felt satisfied that I would have a real impact on their writing ability and, more importantly, on their desire to write and their confidence in doing so. For the past few years I have integrated writing into most of my curriculum. This year, though, I was encountering a bit of a problem. Four of my twenty-seven students were classified as learning disabled (LD) and received their language arts instruction in a resource room from the special education teacher.

I discovered quickly that three of the LD students could not write. Oh, they could copy, and two of them had nice handwriting and could even write cursive, but when asked to put their own words on paper they gave me a blank look that said, "I'm in the resource room, I can't do that." Promising them that spelling didn't matter had little effect. One of the students, Jerry, could not determine the first letter of a word he might want to write. The special education teacher, Penny, described Jerry as a non-reader, still working on pre-primer skills. She had started the process of having him retested to see if he would qualify for a self-contained, full-day, learning disability class or a class for mentally impaired students. He had last been tested during the year he repeated first grade, and his IQ scores had placed him on the borderline of "moderately mentally impaired." Now there seemed to be a consensus that Jerry was not going to learn to read, that he would never be able to benefit much from academics, and that it was just a matter of time before he would qualify for a program to give him training more suitable to his ability.

At the beginning of the year, all four of my LD kids would sit and doodle after I gave journal prompts. Sometimes I requested a student helper to spell for them or take dictation. Gradually, three of the LD students overcame their inhibitions and began to make independent journal entries. One, Jackie, a hard-working child who received additional help at home and managed to keep up fairly well with the other fourth graders, finally became convinced that I wouldn't be upset or mark up his writing just because his spelling was primitive. In fact, he was proud that I actually made an effort to interpret it. By the second week of school, he had begun to lengthen his journal entries from one sentence to three or four (well, there were three or four ideas, no punctuation). Jerry, however, couldn't begin to keep up.

Jerry was a small child, smaller than most fourth graders, despite the fact that he had spent two years in first grade. He had a pleasant disposition and bright eyes. The other children liked him, and if allowed he would occupy himself quietly for long periods, looking at picture books or working puzzles. He seemed unconcerned with his inability to understand and complete tasks others tackled easily. Concepts such as north and south, countries versus states, probably even my everyday vocabulary, seemed to evade him. Whenever I took a few minutes to try to work with him individually, I rarely got a meaningful response. A shrug of the shoulders or an unrelated query were common. Students who had been good peer coaches for others also reported that he would not respond, that he just didn't seem to understand even after an explanation. Usually, Jerry's face either assumed a blank look or a grin, one that seemed to say, "You must be joking, I can't learn this."

As Jerry tired of copying assignments from others and his cooperative group became frustrated with trying to help him, he drifted off into his own thoughts: doodling, drawing pictures, and failing to benefit from the time he spent in my classroom. During the third week of school the class was working on a writing assignment when I passed Jerry's desk and found him drawing a picture. As I reached out to take his drawing from him (I confess, I stifle my budding artists' creativity by
confiscating their drawings at times they are supposed to be otherwise engaged), I hesitated and realized it would be cruel to take away the one activity that he could do independently and successfully. I remembered a presentation by a kindergarten teacher (during the West Virginia Writing Project Summer Institute) who engaged her students in writing by drawing and then writing captions or stories. I told Jerry I would make a deal with him. Despite the fact that as Jerry’s classroom teacher I was responsible for his social studies and science curriculum, I decided to release him from those tasks, tasks he was unable to complete anyway. I told him that he could draw in my classroom — anytime he wanted — if he would write a story about what was in the picture.

Jerry gave me his little grin that meant, “I can’t, but if you say so, I’ll try.” A half hour later he was staring blankly at his completed drawing (figure 1), unable to begin his story. “Jerry,” I said, “what is this a picture of?”

“A car.”

“Tell me more about it”

“It’s a car.”

“What’s that thing on the front of it? What kind of car is it?”

“It’s a drill. It’s a drilling car”

“What’s on top of it?”

“A machine gun.”

Jerry and I talked about how he would write that, and we finally decided on, “This is a car. This is a drilling car. There’s a machine gun on top of the roof.”

“OK, what’s the first word you are going to write?” I asked Jerry.

“Car?” he asked hesitantly. I tried not to show my frustration as I asked him to repeat the beginning of his “story,” and then asked him again for the first word in his story. This time Jerry responded correctly, “This.”

“Do you know the first letter in ‘This’?” Jerry had to think, and finally shrugged his shoulders with a smile. Why, I wondered, did the first sound have to be a blend!

“OK, the first sound is ‘th’ and that’s kind of hard. It’s made by Th. Can you figure out the next letters?” Jerry was able to identify the ‘s’ sound at the end, and guessed ‘e’ for the vowel. “Good, actually it’s an ‘t,’ but you were close, so do you remember how the word ‘This’ starts?” He did, so after he wrote the first word I asked him if he remembered the second word, which he did, and encouraged him to write down all the words as best he could. I told him he could get help from other kids in his group by asking them for the first letter of any words he didn’t know. I didn’t want to pressure him, so I left him alone, hoping he would get over his uncertainties or his shyness and ask for help if he needed it. He didn’t write much more that day. I think he was hoping I would forget about it or give up.

The next day when Jerry returned from the resource room, I asked him to get out the story he was writing. He remembered the whole story he had planned. On his paper was “This is a d.” I went through the process of helping him identify the sounds in “drilling” and the letters that went with the sounds including telling him the word ended with “ing.” Then I had him write the word using his invented spelling. “Jerry,” I said, “I know this is very hard for you to do, but you can have as much time as you need to finish your story. You can ask Stacie for the first letter of every word, and then add any other letters you think are in the word. If you can’t figure out any of the other letters in a word, it’s OK if each word is spelled with only the first letter.”

Some time later, passing Jerry’s desk, I stopped to check his progress. In frustration, and in his desire to be finished with this impossible task, Jerry had strung a

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Figure 1: This is a drilling car: Machine gun on top of the roof.
long group of letters together to make the sentence that was supposed to describe the machine gun (mignonginahomniD; see Figure 1). When I asked him to read me what he had written, Jerry gave me his knowing smile, as if to say "we both know this isn't right, or even close." But I pointed to the first word, and he dutifully repeated the story as he remembered it. "This is a car. This is a drilling car. Machine gun on top of the roof." His face showed a mixture of pleasure and amazement when I smiled and patted him on the back and told him he'd done a great job. Jerry's mischievous grin told me that he didn't really believe he had accomplished anything of merit. I told him he'd done fine, but since not everything was spelled correctly, I would write his story on the bottom of the paper. I wrote his story as he had read it to me, and then we read it together, pointing carefully to each word. Finally, I had Jerry point to each word as he read it alone. He beamed as I congratulated him for reading "his story" all by himself. I pointed out to him that it was harder for me to read his words on top, since all his "words" ran together. Then asked Jerry to copy the corrected version onto the back of his paper, a task he had no trouble with, and he read his own words aloud to the class as he held up the picture. The class broke into spontaneous applause.

The next picture was an elaboration of the first, this time with two cars. Once again, before Jerry wrote, I asked him to tell me the story of his picture. I deliberately used the word "story" because I wanted him to feel that he was producing more than a static image. At this time, Jerry's ability or willingness to elaborate anything verbally was limited. At first, he only listed the objects. I was tempted to put words in his mouth and give him a sentence. Instead I repeated, "Tell me the story of what's in this picture." Finally, through a give-and-take session we came up with the "story" shown in Figure 2.

Jerry showed resourcefulness by selecting words from his first piece for this one, and this time he was less reluctant to risk asking another student for help. In fact, Stacie decided to spell the word "police" for him, and I had to ask her to restrict her help to the first letter or two, or try to get Jerry to "sound out" the first letter. He had little confidence in his ability to sound out words, but he would make the effort if encouraged. I didn't want Jerry to be completely dependent on me or other students to spell for him. I feared he would then just see writing as another activity he could do only with someone's help. Becoming confident with his ability to write words independently—even if he only put down the first letter of a word—was what I was hoping for, though at this point, I had little confidence he would be able to do it.

Since it was almost October, we were writing Halloween stories as part of a writing contest, "Write for Fright," sponsored by the public library. I told my special education students they could draw first, then write, while the other students had to write before they could draw. Jerry had a hard time getting started, but after he heard some of the others' rough drafts, he got into the spirit of blood and gore and drew the first of what I came to call his "Witch, the Flying Sword, and the Rolling Head" anthology, comedies in which magical beings were chopping the heads off his classmates.

As Jerry began to tell me the story of his Halloween drawing, I realized it was becoming easier for me to elicit verbal responses from him. He was beginning to speak in sentences and point to different parts of the picture where different events were taking place. After listening to his story, I sent him back to write, this time on standard composition paper, because there wasn't enough room on his picture to write his story. After a while, he returned with a simple sentence, "This is a hont hows" (This is a haunted house). Jerry felt that he was finished. I reminded Jerry of the other things he had told me about the picture and had him tell me the story again. Through the next day Jerry kept returning to my desk and I kept asking him to repeat the story. Gradually he added to his story. Jerry was concerned about his spelling, and though I tried to resist spelling words for him, some words seemed too hard for him to spell. (I even got in the spirit of invented spelling and spelled "through" as "threw" because it just seemed too complicated to explain why "ough" made the "ew" sound.) Though it took two days, his efforts produced a short story that he was proud to read to classmates.
Jerry's next story would mark the true beginning of his writing career. Up until this point, Jerry had been unable to write more than a few words or a sentence without consulting me for help and encouragement. Gradually, he was coming to realize that words on paper could hold meaning, even for him. Jerry began to view himself as a writer and a reader. He was able to accept the praise I gave him with a delighted smile instead of his quizzically disbelieving, almost cynical grin.

This effort, an elaboration of the first haunted house story, was nothing short of miraculous. One day Jerry came to my desk with a drawing and told me the story it represented with practically no prompting. I interrupted him only to ask for clarification. For instance, I became confused about what was happening to the characters, since he referred to all of them as "he." I suggested he give each character a name and helped him label each one on his drawing. The next day Jerry came to me with his completed story (Figure 3). He had used his best handwriting, and he had written his draft independently, without consulting the others in his group... believe me, I asked.

Jerry basked in the glory of his accomplishments. He requested permission to show his work to all his previous teachers and the principal, and came back with an assortment of stickers, candy, pencils, and erasers. This business of being an author was really paying off. I gave Jerry a notebook to make a spelling dictionary. He gladly got busy with this new task, since searching through his stories for a word he wanted was becoming time consuming, even though he said he was beginning to remember how some of the words were spelled.

Several teachers expressed amazement at the progress "I" had made with Jerry. I told them that this showed the incredible power of tying into a child's own language at his/her own level, and that I had really done little but encourage Jerry and given him the time he needed to write.

Following Jerry's initial success, he entered a period in which he became more interested in reading than writing. Since I had no books in my class library below a second grade reading level, I sent him to a first grade teacher to choose some books. She helped him choose some suitable first level trade books, and also gave him a discontinued first grade basal reading book. He was tenacious in practicing his new-found ability to read, and was able to answer questions that demonstrated comprehension. As expected, there were many miscues in his reading, but he did apply some of the phonics and context strategies he had been taught. Penny reported that he was working harder than before in the resource room.

Over the next few weeks, I encouraged Jerry to write other kinds of stories. The stories which followed included some personal experience narratives about target shooting and playing video games in an arcade. These stories showed a growing maturity in sentence development, narrative style, and vocabulary. He was now using invented spelling for words he had never tried writing before. He wrote one story about riding a four-wheeler without first drawing a picture. Jerry had reached the point where he was writing for the sake of telling a story rather than as a requirement to be allowed to draw.

Thinking back to his first effort at putting his own words on paper less than two months previously, I wondered if other special education students could
make this much progress so quickly, and how much potential this child had. Could Jerry ever catch up to other students his age? Or was there a limit to what he could learn, a point at which his impoverished home environment, his innate abilities, or his lack of self-confidence would stop him?

In a conversation with Penny I wondered if she could use the techniques I was using. She complained that though she'd like to try some whole language activities, she was required to follow the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) which identified certain skill strands that Jerry must master, such as identification of vowel sounds and initial consonants. These activities had been prescribed by the psychologist who had done the achievement testing. I walked away, shaking my head, at the thought of psychologists setting curriculum rather than teachers. Jerry already had had phonics instruction for four years with little effect. Where is the common sense in an educational system that continues beating a child’s head against a wall of failure?

It is difficult to express the profound effect working with Jerry has had on me. I have always taught fourth grade, where students come with the ability, sometimes limited, to read. Now I experienced for the first time the thrill of seeing a child make the transition from non-reader to reader. Previously I had guided children who were non-writers to writers, but this was the first time I had seen that writing could come before reading. Hearing the phrase, “Writing to Read,” was not the same as actually witnessing the transition from non-reader to writer and reader.

Jerry's new-found literary skills have caused him to look at his entire school experience in a different light. In the past he saw himself as an outsider, someone who could be left alone to his reveries, or be allowed to work on puzzles at the back of the room while the others pursued the serious side of schoolwork. He was allowed to “do what he could,” with little expectation from his teachers that he could learn to read or perform like other children. His resource room teacher acknowledged that he could have done better in the past, but he was just not interested in his language arts curriculum. Now he was proudly studying his spelling list, as he knew it had a purpose... words to use when he writes. Now he was struggling to read a book and looking twice at unfamiliar words, trying out the sounds, thinking about what meaning fit, looking back to construct meaning from the previous sentence, looking past the first letters, finding meaning in the black squiggles beneath the pictures. Now he was looking around and seeing that he might have a chance to do the same kinds of things other students do, to figure out the meaning of a map or to learn which state goes with which shape. Now Jerry was a reader, a writer. Now Jerry was a thinker, a learner.

Epilogue

During the time the events in this article were occurring and this article was being written, Jerry was reevaluated to determine if the regular classroom and a resource room were still the appropriate placement for him. Despite the new skills that Jerry had developed, after testing he was rediagnosed as “moderately mentally impaired” and placed in a full day, self-contained program to receive training more appropriate to his abilities. In the placement meeting to determine his IEP, I advocated that he be allowed to continue writing stories to develop his reading and writing skills. The closest thing the psychologists could find in their computer menu of learning activities recommended as appropriate for Jerry’s disability was “Language Experience” activities. There was no mention of writing in the description. On my request an additional activity was added to the IEP — helping Jerry to write stories.

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