Sabal Palms Writing Project: Reading Like Writers

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What is the resource?
The Sabal Palms Writing Project (Texas) created a one-week institute for first through third grade teachers of English language learners (ELL), in which they experienced how to “read like writers.” The institute used Katie Wood Ray’s *Wondrous Words: Writers and Writing in the Elementary Classroom* (National Council of Teachers of English, 1999), as well other books drawn from children’s literature (see list below).

What is our rationale for using this resource?
The primary purpose of our New-teacher Institute, for teachers with less than three years experience, was to engage first through third grade teachers in reading and responding to culturally relevant children’s literature. Although writing instruction is required at all levels, it is often neglected in the lower grades where it is not tested.

Teachers indicate that they do not teach writing because they do not view themselves as skilled writers, or they do not know how to teach writing. Our institute aimed at giving teachers the skills and the confidence to meet this important challenge.

Based on what we know about how reading aloud supports language development, particularly with second language learners, we decided to introduce our participants to culturally relevant children’s literature and connect writing exercises to those stories. Additionally, we wanted to provide participants with strategies to teach writing that connected to their reading.

To accomplish our goal, we used two key resources: (1) a collection of quality children’s literature and (2) Katie Wood Ray’s *Wondrous Words*, a professional resource we selected to conceptually ground and guide our institute. Drawing on classroom stories and experiences, Ray shows teachers how to pay attention to what authors do effectively; in the end, teachers learn to teach their own students “how to read like authors.”

How did we use this resource?
We modeled our week-long institute on the structure of our very successful Invitational Summer Institute. Each day started with breakfast, a log of the previous day’s activities, some journal-writing time, followed by a reading/writing workshop.

Participants read and discussed *Wondrous Words* in interactive, cooperative reading circles, a format based on an adaptation of Harvey Daniels’ work with *Literature Circles*. They read and took notes in a double entry journal format. Through these discussions, participants began to envision using various crafting techniques as they worked on revisions.

In the revision process, they were asked to try one of the craft techniques they learned in *Wondrous Words*. Participants immediately saw the effects on their own writing: they created rhythm and coherence through repeating sentence structures, through asking a series of questions, through creating dialogue, and through other techniques introduced in from *Wondrous Words*. Eventually, participants learned to use these techniques in writing about their own experiences. Their pride in their own writing became evident as they shared at the end of each day in the author’s chair.

**What did Wondrous Words represent for our site?**

*Wondrous Words* encapsulates what we have long sought to accomplish in the New-teacher Institute and, indeed, in the Summer Institute. We have long preached the “read like writers” message and have used samples of professional writing to show teachers how this works. We have based writing prompts on a reading selection and asked participants to incorporate writing patterns they detected.

In *Wondrous Words* we have a resource that conceptualizes all that we have sought to accomplish. Just as our new teachers learned to read like writers, they also recognized the recursive relationships in which authors develop their craft through reading and revision. They are able to easily apply their newly learned strategies not only to their own writing, but also to their classroom instruction.

In the New-teacher’s Institute, we used an array of children’s literature that was culturally relevant to our population; however, *Wondrous Words* is filled with literary models that transcend culturally specific experiences. It drives home the truth that good literature knows no cultural
boundary. The book vividly demonstrates how students of all cultural backgrounds can always connect to good literature.

Moreover, *Wondrous Words* also shows teachers – from elementary through high school – that children’s stories offer an inexhaustible resource for stimulating writing and for offering accessible models of specific writing techniques. Through *Wondrous Words*, children’s literature will continue to play a key part in the New-teacher Institute as well as the Summer Institute.

**What was the impact on new teachers?**

Within the span of a single week, NTI participants made a magical transformation, from being insecure writers to being confident ones. Along with new confidence, participants also acquired new teaching methods: Through reading high quality children’s literature out loud, teachers had new methods for exposing children to rich language and for helping children identify writing techniques they could apply to their own writing.

In addition to learning how to teach students how to read like writers, participants also learned how to craft writing prompts from children’s literature. Drawn from the children’s stories introduced in Literature Circles, prompts were phrased in such a way that students could draw on their personal experiences.

Teachers learned that their everyday lived experience provided rich material to write about; they no longer could fall back on the excuse, “I don’t know what to write about.” Teachers found that writing, once considered difficult, flowed much more easily when they tapped into personal memories and cultural experiences stimulated by writing prompts related to the read-alouds.

One particularly memorable read-aloud was based on Amada Irma Perez’s story *My Very Own Room*. The story is about a little girl who grows tired of sharing a room with several irksome brothers and decides it is time to have her very own room. With her mother’s help, they convert a closet into a private space for her. After listening to the story read out loud, participants, in a three-minute quick write, were asked to write about a special room they had. (See sidebar)
Many participants noted Amada Perez’s use of Spanish words and phrases in *My Very Own Room*, which gave them permission to do the same in their own writing. They recognized that the use of such language added authenticity and voice to their stories.

Participants were also excited by another wonderful story that makes for an effective read-aloud, Cynthia Rylant’s *The Relatives Came*, which, as the title suggests, is about a child experiencing the intrusion of relatives visiting her home. Because of the subtle reference to “the relatives,” rather than “my relatives,” participants could easily remember times their own relatives came to visit. Shifting from listening to writing, many participants were so flooded with memories that they had trouble deciding which visit to write about!

Teachers often commented that they had never considered children’s literature as a source for teaching the craft of writing. Furthermore, our teacher-participants discovered that when children regularly listen to language read out loud, their own facility with language grows, which results in improved writing. They learned that their students wrote more fluently, easily producing rich, authentic vignettes that they loved to share in author’s chair.

Through the school year, we have periodically met with the teachers who participated in the New-Teachers’ Institute. In these meetings, they proudly shared their students’ writings and other forms of student work. These meetings confirmed that writing and reading had become an integral part of each class day. Stimulated by the rich resources available in *Wondrous Words* and the other sources we made available, teachers were accumulating their own library of children’s literature to introduce their students to rich language and accessible models of authors’ craft.

Following is a list in progress of children’s books used in the institute. This list continues to grow each year.


Henkes, Kevin. *Chrysanthemum.* Scholastic Books


For more information, contact Bertha Campos.

Side Bar

One Teacher Writes in Response to “My Very Own Room”

The Living Room
My grandma had a very small living room in her very small house. This living room was always very special to me. I remember watching many TV shows on her black and white TV with rabbit antennas. When my grandma died, she wasn’t taken to a funeral parlor. Instead this special living room was used as the funeral parlor. Friends and neighbors came to view my grandma and to pay their respects to the family. After her death and funeral, this special living room wasn’t so special anymore. As a matter of fact, I rarely went in there to watch TV.