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Confidence Is it always positive?

Welcome to Ann's Fourth and Fifth Grade Montessori Classroom

Ann and her peers are dismissed from circle to find a workplace around the room to practice writing a complete paragraph. The projector shares the writing prompt we discussed about "superheroes". Ann finds a spot at a table by some friends. She quickly organizes her workspace, by putting her binder and notebooks in a nice and neat pile. She debates placing her pencil box on the top of the pile or setting it on the table. She ultimately decides to set it between the pile and her water bottle. She pulls herself and her chair close to the table, sits up proudly and begins brainstorming. She begins writing and takes a couple of 15 second breaks to collaborate with her peers. Within 5 minutes of sitting at the table, she has a plan and begins writing. She continues to write for the remaining 20 minutes.

Everyone is directed back to circle for a brief sharing opportunity. Ann jumps up and walks to the front of circle with her paper in hand. "I would be Pinkalicious because I like pink. It is pretty. This is why I would be Pinkalicious." Her face beaming with pride as the class applauds and she returns to her spot. The next volunteer approaches the front and begins a lengthy and thorough description of why he would be Batman, followed by another student's multiple page explanation of wanting to be Animal Rescuer. Ann is still smiling and holding her paper proudly. Our sharing opportunity concludes as Ms. Kay, our teacher assistant, joins our classroom. Ann, appropriately, quickly tracks Ms. Kay down to share her writing.

Meet Ann

Ann is in fourth grade. She has been a member of the Montessori environment since first grade. It seems to fit her well; she appreciates the individual and small group approach. In the

upper elementary class, she feels confident and successful as a learner. When consulting previous documentation and her lower Montessori teacher (first through third grade), confidence was not something she possessed until the end of third grade. Her previous teacher believes this is the most confidence Ann has ever had, in regard to school.

She enjoys writing; and will often engage in writing opportunities during recess and at home. Ann is a thoughtful and proud writer. She carefully plans her writing and diligently forms every letter on her page. She critically evaluates her work using daily checklists and writing workshop unit rubrics. She focuses on each component and rereads her writing as she evaluates. Ann loves to share her writing with peers and adults. She loves to read it aloud to her audience but also enjoys giving her reader a chance to read it to him or herself. She is a respectful listener; she encourages peers and provides specific compliments.

Ann struggles with writing. Her writing is brief and lacks depth. With prompting, she can normally articulate more evidence than what is written. Her writing is filled with spelling and grammatical errors. Her spelling is usually very phonetic, *Words their Way* placed her into second grade range. After prompting, she can correct her basic capitalization and punctuation mistakes. When considering checklists and rubrics, she will reread her entire piece of writing between each stage of evaluation and may correct a few minor details (capitalization or punctuation) but she consistently checks off each component as successfully completed. She will ask questions about the rubric wording to insure she understands the directions, but she rarely finds corrections to make.

Ann is a careful writer and works incredibly hard. She believes in her ability and views herself as successful. Her confidence is prominent and she is always eager to share. Despite her

desire to be a strong writer, she struggles with writing and appears to be unaware of her underdeveloped skills.

Helping Ann

During the first week of school, I perceived Ann would require extra assistance and help with writing. With MEAP looming in our near future, I decided to focus on paragraph structure and basic editing. Ann and her peers engaged in entertaining and inspiring morning journal topics as we explored two main strategies. We began by exploring paragraph structure using Oreos (O-Opinion, R-Reason, E-Explanation, O-Opinion (restated)). Over time, this turned into a double stuffed Oreo (O.R.E.R.E.O.) and occasionally it was triple stuffed (O.R.E.R.E.R.E.O.). Approximately 1.5 weeks after our initial O.R.E.O. lesson, students were introduced to C.U.P.S. (C-Capitals, U-Understanding; does your writing make sense?, P-Punctuation, S-Spelling), this is designed to help with basic revision and editing. Students examined their writing using the C.U.P.S. checklist and different colored pencils for each stage of revising and editing. During this time our class motto was, “the more colorful your paper, the better!”

Ann quickly grasped a strong understanding of O.R.E.O. and could articulate why her writing needed to have complete ideas supported with reasons and evidence. She followed the strategy of brainstorming at the top of her page using an O.R.E.O. table and then rewrote her ideas in paragraph form at the bottom. She knew to add additional words into her paragraph that were not present in her brainstorm tables, in order to form complete sentences.

Ann articulated a strong understanding of C.U.P.S. She diligently attempted C.U.P.S. but made minimal corrections. She seemed unable to find mistakes in her writing despite her conscientious effort.

About a month of practicing O.R.E.O. and C.U.P.S., students were given the task of examining their knowledge of various superheroes and creating their best O.R.E.O. and then checking for C.U.P.S. It was at this time that Ann developed her writing piece about Pinkalicious.

Over the next couple of months, Ms. Kay and I tried to support Ann with her writing. Ann received preview lessons to help prepare her for writing lessons. She received additional follow-up lessons and many mini-lessons during writing workshop and morning journals.

Interventions for Ann

The support Ann was received was not inspiring the growth I had hoped. After consulting colleagues, professors, and educational texts and carefully considering the feedback, I had six specific ideas to try with Ann.

Brainstorming

In order to promote thought development, Ann is frequently given the opportunity to verbally brainstorm. Ms. Kay or I prompt Ann to help expand her ideas before she begins writing.

Forming Sentences

Ms. Kay corrects many of Ann's daily assignments and frequently engages in mini-lesson opportunities. Ms. Kay has been instructed to focus on guiding Ann to write and understand complete sentences. She also regularly encourages Ann to prove her writing by adding evidence. This scenario occurs with writing in regard to all subject areas.

Correcting

This first idea was to continue with the interventions previously started. Although Ann's writing contained multiple spelling and grammatical errors, I did not want to inhibit her writing

process. On a daily basis, I focused on three mistakes to correct. I picked one spelling error that she could correct on her own by consulting her spelling journal, one spelling mistake that required us to consult a dictionary, and one grammatical mistake that turned into a mini-lesson.

Evaluating

Ann and I started looking at sentences and short paragraphs. We evaluated sentence(s) by cutting, manipulating, pasting, and adding additional words and phrases to demonstrate the various ways to convey the same message. Initially it was an opportunity for us to see the same concept written many ways. We have furthered our lessons by looking at what version of our new text makes the most sense while offering the most information to our reader.

Peer Mentoring

Ann meets with a fifth grade mentor multiple times each week to examine their journals together. Her mentor and she take turns reading their entries aloud to each other. They evaluate both entries and provide constructive feedback. Ann's mentor is a strong writer. She can assess and articulate changes that would make both her own and Ann's writing stronger. My hope is for Ann to internalize the process of self-evaluation.

Conversing

Ann and her parents have a strong relationship. Her parents are very supportive of her and want to encourage strong writing skills. The goal is not to overwhelm Ann. Her parents have been working on helping her elaborate in her conversational skills by asking her basic questions and encouraging her to give more information. Her parents and I have discussed elaboration activities to play together in the car to help Ann articulate all of her thoughts. One game they have started playing is having Ann describe an object she see out the window in as much detail as possible. They have also started creating conversational stories together while

trying to paint a word picture. Ann's parents are encouraging her to be more specific when recalling the events of her day and to use evidence to support her general statements. Her family has made a deliberate effort to ask questions at dinner to all family members and to discuss the importance of digging into the details of their days. The goal with these exercises is to immerse Ann into details. My hope is once this method of thinking becomes second nature to her, it will begin to transfer into her writing process.

Throughout all of these interventions Ann is willing to learn, take advice, and put forth the effort to be a strong writer. She continues to be positive. Ann takes suggestions seriously and listens to directions from her parents, teachers, and peers. Ann continues to be willing to share her writing. She verbalizes seeing comparative growth in her writing after examining it with members in her support system. She is not applying and considering the strategies when she is writing independently and rarely takes the initiative to seek assistance. She is very open to support and appears to be willing to work on her writing. Over the past two months, Ann has not demonstrated internalizing the writing suggestions through application. Despite all of her effort and extra support, her confidence prospers.

Examining Ann's Confidence

One of the most interesting aspects about Ann's situation is her resilient confidence. How can a girl who is struggling daily even after individual lessons maintain her smile as she shares her writing to a room filled with peers? According to Gary Troia(2009), confidence might not only represent a healthy outlook about individual capabilities, "but might instead cover up poor task analysis, limited self awareness, and critical skills deficit and also might serve as important self-protective role" (p.69-70).

Ann's Confidence as a Cover

It is possible that Ann's confidence is helping to cover up her poor task analysis, limited self-awareness, and critical skills deficit. Poor task analysis is an issue that could easily be masked in our classroom. I always walk students through directions carefully and slowly with a visual demonstration. There are always specific instructions on the board for students to use as a resource. Ann does refer to the directions often and will ask direction-based questions as needed. If she is struggling with task analysis, she may be coping well. She strongly demonstrates limited self-awareness. Suzanne Hidi and Pietro Boscolo(2006) note, "learners who feel competent about writing should be more likely to choose to write, expend effort, and persist at writing tasks than students who doubt their capabilities" (p. 149). Her eager spirit and willingness to write and share does not align to her abilities. She is demonstrating limited self-awareness. When she is evaluating her work, she carefully rechecks her work with her rubric following the specific directions to reread her story as she looks for each new concept from her rubric. Yet, she is normally unable to find errors other than capitalization and punctuation, clearly indicating critical skills deficit. Perhaps Ann's confidence masks an undiagnosed learning disability.

Despite Ann's recurring struggles with concepts in reading, writing, and mathematics, ongoing assessments have placed her within benchmark range. Therefore, she does not qualify to initiate a learning disability evaluation. However, that does not mean she does not have a learning disability.

Ann and I have examined writing strategies, such as rereading for clarity and rearranging words to produce stronger sentences. Although she is always compliant and willing to work with me, she has not internalized our dialogue to assist her when she is independently working. Carol Sue Englert (1992) mentioned, "students with learning disabilities have difficulty manipulating

and perceiving the relationship among ideas, monitoring their texts, and using writing strategies to produce coherent texts” (p. 153). Ann can produce coherent text but it is at a level much below where her writing should be considering she has approximately two months left of her fourth grade year.

Ann’s confidence aligns with tendencies associated with learning disabilities. Her high confidence may stem from inaccurate perceptions. “Learning disabled students showed unrealistically high self-efficacy judgments of their capabilities for creative writing” (*Motivation in Writing*, 149). Ann demonstrates high confidence in all writing genres she has explored this year. This includes creative, information, narrative, and procedural writing and poetry.

Ann has been working at school and at home on expressing herself thoroughly. These interventions have been in place for two months. She is able to articulate additional information when prompted, but she continues not to offer extra information. Steve Graham and Karen Harris(1989) noted, “learning disabled students’ problems are, in part, due to difficulties in expressing the knowledge they have” (p.1). Ann does demonstrate difficulty with expressing her knowledge independently.

Although Ann does not qualify by our school standards to pursue a learning disability evaluation, it is possible that she is suffering from an undiagnosed learning disability, which is making it much more difficult for her to become a successful and independent writer.

Ann’s Confidence as a Self-Protective Role

Perhaps Ann’s confidence is a subconscious means of self-protection. It is possible that Ann is unintentionally trying to cover up her struggling confidence of previous years. Two motives might be driving this extra confidence in Ann. She might be trying to avoid negative experiences of self-doubt with confidence or she might need to feel success.

Ann's negative emotional reaction history (*Motivation to Learn*, p.120-123) may encourage her confident demeanor this year. She has a history of being upset and struggling with confidence when she was in her lower Montessori classroom. Her over-confidence was prominent when she switched to the upper Montessori classroom. Maybe her confidence transferred to her writing because she feels successful just being in a new classroom. Perhaps she resorts back to that feeling of success when writing because it is a new experience than what she had in first, second, and third grade. Is this new classroom environment driving her confidence? Deborah Stipek(2002) notes, "According to White and Piaget, the increasing competence that results from practicing newly developing skills and mastering challenging tasks engenders a positive emotional experience" (p.122). Are these new experiences all she needed to become a confident student? Can Ann be internalizing the additional lessons as a challenge and a new opportunity which is helping her separate from her negative history?

Ann may have the internal need to be successful. In past years, she knew she was struggling. She had multiple tutors. Her parents feared failure and tried to openly support her by approaching the topic of success with her. Did she reach a point where she felt that positivity was the only option to overcoming reality? Jere Brophy(2010) mentions, "motivation to succeed is determined by the strength of one's overall need for achievement. ... People who focus on achieving success tend to approach achievement situations willingly, to prefer activities that are moderately difficult for them, and to engage in those activities with emphasis on developing their skills" (p. 45). With each new, review, or back-tracking lesson, Ann approaches each concept with an open mind and is willing to follow directions. Each lesson has a specific purpose and desired outcome. Deborah Stipek (2002) notes, "Harter systematically studies positive emotion in elementary school-age children's responses to mastery attempts... Tasks that required some

effort but were not extremely difficult resulted in the most positive expression” (p.123). The concepts Ann covers with Ms. Kay or me are direct and straightforward. If Ann views the lesson positively, she may be transferring this confidence to her ability level as support to how she is successful, in order to fill her need of success.

Are these lessons keeping her engaged and positive by increasing her belief in herself and new concepts? Is she staying strong and willing to put forth extra effort in hopes of developing a strong understanding while she demonstrates her incremental success and protects her confidence?

What comes next for Ann?

There are several actions are needed to help promote Ann’s success in writing regardless of whether the source of Ann’s confidence comes from a place of unawareness of expectations because of learning disability or as protective means to help shield herself from her struggles.

First Ann needs to get on Special Education’s radar for the possibility of a learning disability despite the fact that she does not currently qualify for evaluation, especially when considering all of the interventions in place, her high level of motivation, and overwhelming confidence. At the very least it will begin documentation.

While the learning disability evaluation is occurring somewhat behind the scenes, there are two strategies to try in the classroom. These will help develop Ann’s writing skills and independence that will produce achievement to match her confidence levels, regardless of where the confidence drive is originating.

Carol Sue Englert(1992) notes that students with learning disabilities benefit when writing is taught as a “holistic and authentic communicative process (consisting of the recursive subprocess of planning, organizing, writing, editing, and revising, and emphasizing real writing

purposes and meaningful communication as the writing goal) rather than a linear process consisting of isolated goals”(p. 153). Learning disability or not, Ann may benefit following a specific process. There is going to be a file cabinet in the room to help walk her through the writing process by using a series of reflection and evaluation worksheets to help her with her prewriting, drafting, composing, editing, and revising. Maybe Ann will be more successful if each step is an entirely new stage that requires her to move across the room and to mentally shift gears to the next task. Englert provides insight into including step-by step and fill-in the blank worksheets that provide learners with a specific and guided process which allow them to achieve success independently.

If Ann is coming from a place of feeling the need to succeed and avoid failure, maybe she would benefit from receiving specific strategies and acronyms to help her insure that she is completing each needed part of her writing. This would benefit her if she has a learning disability also because it is providing her with another resource for support. Evidence Based Practice Briefs (2007) supports the use of acronyms to help students learn and remember the order of how to write, although they offer many ideas. The acronyms Ann will start with are S.P.A.C.E. and D.A.R.E. to help develop two systems that will transfer to most of her writing needs. The acronym S.P.A.C.E. helps students when writing a narrative because it reminds them that their writing needs to include setting elements, problems, actions, consequences, and emotions. D.A.R.E. reminds students to develop a topic, add supporting details, reject counter arguments, and to end with a conclusion when writing an essay. Ann will receive specific instruction and cheat sheets to help her with these concepts.

These two goals of creating a clear holistic approach to writing and creating specific guidelines and rules for her writing process will further her writing abilities by breaking down

the writing process and helping to increase her success. These processes will help Ann with her writing skills regardless of whether the reason for her overconfidence is an undiagnosed learning disability or coping mechanism. These strategies will help to produce positive confidence within Ann as her writing continues to develop.

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